A Picture Paints a Thousand Words

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A Picture Paints a Thousand Words

by justheretoreadhannibalfics

Summary

Doctor Hannibal Lecter has a new muse, who he has become entirely obsessed with. Will Graham has been sketched and painted by the doctor so many times he has almost had enough, but this final painting is promised to be the last and best. While Hannibal works to continue his association with Will, a murderer stalks the streets of London and strikes fear into the hearts of all who hear of their work.

Dorian Gray AU with Jack the Ripper, and a lot more murder than Oscar Wilde's book.

Notes

Did I become way too obsessed with this idea? Yes. I hope it's good, since it's definitely a bit different from my usual. Hopefully I'll be able to do it justice.

1

“Why, Hannibal, who is this?” Chilton cried, gazing at the canvas holding the nearly completed opus Hannibal meant to finish today, “he’s absolutely tabula rasa.”

Hannibal ticked up an eyebrow at his guest. Chilton had overstayed his welcome, but this promised a new source of entertainment. While Hannibal had little patience for someone as distasteful as the doctor, he was always interested in finding new amusement for himself and his muse. The latter sometimes objected to his unconventional ideas of what he considered entertaining, but he always played along and made the day much more interesting for Hannibal. If Doctor Chilton could provide an hour or so of amusement for them both, he would have earned his keep, as it were, and Hannibal would allow him to stay until he was no longer wanted for the task.

“My newest muse,” Hannibal answered, “he is quite handsome, is he not? I simply cannot get my fill of him. Do feel free to elaborate on your comment, though.”

Looking at his painting, Hannibal mused over Chilton’s misconception. Unfinished as it was, the picture failed to capture the bright, sharp intelligence in his muse’s eyes. That cutting gaze that so often left Hannibal feeling naked in the boy’s presence. He was in no way tabula rasa, but Chilton was a fool so often Hannibal found it a source of amusement rather than a shock. It was likely this was the only reason he humoured Chilton at all these days, rather than politely refuse every attempt by the other man to spend any time in each other’s company.

“He’s just positively fresh, isn’t he?” Chilton asked, “a mind unmarred by even the thought of sin, if your painting has done him justice. An uncorrupted youth, open to influence. A rare find these days, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiled.

He agreed that his muse was a rare find. Perhaps the rarest kind in the world, if he had a say in the matter. That did not change the fact that everything else Fredrick had said about him was entirely wrong in the most humorous way. Hannibal’s muse was not clay in anyone’s hands, though he inspired the most fantastic and ambitious art pieces Hannibal had thus far attempted. Hannibal sometimes fantasised that he could shape the boy’s mind the way he would shape his likeness, using words as his chisel and unearthing the darkness that lay just beneath the surface, exposing those unsavoury thoughts he knew were concealed under the boy’s skin, ready to be freed. It was a vein of thought Hannibal only indulged in sparingly, as it might distract him from the truth of the matter, which was that the boy himself was more likely than not to expose those things with only minimal urging, and when he did it would be glorious. Hannibal would not want to miss it due to fantasies.

As it happened, Hannibal was expecting the boy any minute so he could finish the portrait. While he had initially been anxious that Fredrick leave, so the two would never be forced to meet, he now thought it might prove entertaining to let his muse speak with Chilton while

Hannibal worked. It would certainly provide him some amusement during the day's work, and a chance once again to see his muse's clever mind at work. He was curious to see how far Fredrick's foolishness would go this time, and what would finally put a stop to it. If Hannibal's muse played along today, as he so often did, Hannibal thought it likely Chilton could be strung along for quite some time. He may even leave Hannibal's home today with the idea that he had been entirely correct in his first impression of the young man in the painting, though he could not be more wrong.

"He is a rarity, indeed," Hannibal demurred meekly, pleased with his own work and the idea that he would soon see quite the show, "though I fear very much he will grow bored with me. I seem to do nothing else these days but ask him to sit for me. He sits so wonderfully, and my work is so much finer when I work on him. Even just having him near causes me to work on a higher level, it seems to me."

Chilton was peering now at Hannibal, as if he was a new and peculiar specimen he would like to study. It was a strange expression to see on the man's face, as Chilton rarely took an academic approach to anything. He was much more interested in gossip than the actual work that pulled society along and made it function. Hannibal often used this to his advantage, allowing Chilton to make assumptions that were not strictly correct, with the knowledge they would soon be spread and considered gospel truth by all those who heard it repeated. Hannibal often amused himself by playing such games with society, and he had carved a place for himself within it that was perfectly fit to him, allowing him to move about without drawing any particular attention or suspicion.

Hannibal knew his muse would be annoyed by Chilton, at the very least. That was part of the allure. Will was so controlled and calm usually, and seeing his anger flare was a rare treat. Hannibal would have to pay the price of annoying the boy, after the fact, but that too would be a privilege. Any attention given to him by his young muse was an honour and a blessing, in his mind, and he was aware this was quite a tedious and unsteady position to be in for someone such as himself. To be so utterly devoted to any man, especially one with such a complicated relationship with morality and sin, was a mountainous risk for anyone who wished to remain an independent and free agent in the world.

"I do believe I would very much like to meet this young man, Hannibal," Chilton said, "He sounds like an absolute delight."

Hannibal nodded, though he feigned distraction, setting out his paints and brushes. This was a subtle gesture to imply he did not want Chilton to linger any longer, but he knew it would go unheeded by the man. While Chilton was no doubt aware he had overstayed his welcome, by this time in the conversation, he would not leave now that he had caught on a topic that interested him. This is what Hannibal was depending on in order to secure himself that entertainment he expected from the meeting between Chilton and his muse.

"I do not wish you to meet him," he said absently, "I fear you may upset him in some way. He is all I can think about, and I would not want him to blame me for your poor behaviour."

Chilton huffed a laugh, and Hannibal knew for certain he was on the hook, and more than willing to be reeled in. He was determined to stay, now, which Hannibal considered a

personal triumph, as he had successfully manipulated the man into doing that which he wanted without revealing his entire hand.

“Come now, Hannibal, I am not all that bad. You really must introduce us.”

Hannibal frowned and turned to tell Chilton to stop being so presumptuous, but the door to the studio opened and Francis entered with his eyes respectfully down. That was quite perfect timing, as Hannibal had already reached the perfect balance of the conversation, and had not wanted to risk upsetting it by continuing on the farce that he wanted Chilton gone.

“Will Graham has arrived, sir,” Francis said, “shall I show him in?”

Impeccable timing, as Hannibal had come to expect from the boy. He was more than pleased, and would have to make it known to his muse the moment they were alone again.

“Yes, of course, Francis,” Hannibal said, “right away. And bring him something to drink. Whatever he wants.”

Francis gave a curt nod and left again. Hannibal turned to make sure everything was in place, and saw Chilton grinning widely, as if he had stumbled upon a fortune without having earned it, and had every intention to take advantage. Hannibal found that as amusing as he found it crass, as Chilton had certainly done none of the work, yet he had not stumbled upon anything at all. This was by Hannibal’s design, and the man was entirely clueless.

“Will Graham,” he mused, “what a plain name for a handsome creature. Now, at least, I shall be able to ask around about him.”

Hannibal had thought so as well, upon first meeting Will. The name belied none of the brilliance or beauty the boy contained, and it was an interesting camouflage that allowed him to operate within society without drawing too much attention. Hannibal and Will were much alike in that way, though their manners of operating were quite different. Hannibal now knew that Will had entirely grown into the name, magnifying it through his own wit and intelligence, so now it seemed the only name he could possibly possess.

Hannibal sighed, as if very much put upon. He noted the reaction Chilton had to his apparent exasperation, and was satisfied.

“Please, behave yourself, Fredrick,” he said, “if you are to meet him against my wishes, the very least you could do is abide by my wishes. Do not upset him please.”

Chilton smiled, and there was a sparkle of mischief in his eyes that told Hannibal he had every intention of upsetting Will, just to see what would come of it. He hoped to find some tasty morsel of gossip that he could take with him out of this room and make ripples through the city.

That was fine with Hannibal. He thought it more than likely he would leave here with a completely incorrect concept of who Will Graham was, and would be made a fool of when people learned how mistaken he had been.

“-and don’t forget that you really are a handsome man,” a voice in the hall was saying as it grew nearer, “perhaps I should ask Hannibal to paint you, just to please me. I’m certain he would.”

There was a soft mumble as Francis replied to Will’s polite conversation, and Will’s laugh rang out as well in his delight and genuine pleasure. The boy enjoyed lifting up those who felt poorly about themselves, so long as he considered them a person who attempted to do good in the world and had earned good in return. It was one of the rare things Hannibal liked about him. While Will could be incredibly cruel, he only did so to those who deserved it.

That included Hannibal more often than not.

“Hannibal, I was just talking to-” Will cut off when he laid eyes on Chilton, unused to anyone being there when he did his sitting. His sharp eyes scanned Chilton’s form, his clothes and posture, and he seemed to come to a quick conclusion about the man. “I apologise. I did not realise you already had company.”

Will turned to Hannibal expectantly, waiting for any indication of how Hannibal wanted this to go forward. Hannibal was to set the bar, and Will would match him brilliantly, he had no doubt. He always did.

“Will,” Hannibal said warmly, “I am so pleased you came. And clean shaved, as I requested. This is Doctor Chilton, an acquaintance of mine. I do believe he was just leaving.”

Will turned to Chilton with a look of unbeguiled innocence. Hannibal adored Will in every way, and had sketched and painted him with his usual layer of scruff many times, but for this painting he had wanted to really capture his remarkably youthful appearance. So he had requested the beard be shaved whenever he sat for it. Will had expressed his amusement at that, but had put up little argument when it came to the actual act. He was accommodating, when the mood struck, and Hannibal thought it more than likely he was nearly as anxious to see the finished result as Hannibal himself was.

“A pleasure to meet you, I’m sure,” Will said politely, “Forgive me again for my entrance. Hannibal so rarely has company when he is expecting me. I completely forgot myself.”

Chilton shook his head, still smiling. He had a gleam in his eye betraying his intention to find a way under Will’s skin, perhaps to begin peeling the layers back. If he could accomplish such a feat, Hannibal would have to reexamine his opinion of the man entirely, but he had every doubt it would come to that. Will was far too clever for someone like Chilton.

“Think nothing of it. Hannibal was just telling me how well you sit, and how he has been taking advantage of you for it.”

Will raised an eyebrow, a small gesture that Chilton would miss entirely. It was meant for Hannibal alone. A question of the parameters of this game, the rules and goals. It was the same small tell Will displayed when they played chess together, and Hannibal had come to adore it as much as every other part of the young man.

“Indeed I was,” Hannibal said, “And I had nearly gotten to telling him how bored you must become with my silence while I work.”

Will’s lips twitched in a near smile. He understood what Hannibal wanted from Chilton, and by extent from Will himself. There was the name of the game for him.

Hannibal was not silent as he worked. He enjoyed conversation with Will nearly as much as depicting his likeness in his artwork. By saying such a lie, he was letting Will know that he did actually want Chilton to stay. Will would not know the reason yet, but Hannibal was confident he would follow along.

“Oh, incredibly bored,” Will said, as if carrying it as a burden, “Sitting for hours, trying not to move overly much, without a soul to speak with.”

Will’s expression lit up, then, as if having an idea so brilliant it would surely solve all the problems in the world. It was an expression that took complete advantage of his youthful appearance, making one think of a child for just a moment, so innocent and eager did he look.

“Oh, Doctor Chilton, you should stay with us today. Stay, so I will have someone to talk to while Hannibal finishes the painting. Perhaps he will be satisfied with this one. Please say you will stay.”

Chilton was delighted by it, but Hannibal could see he would try to demure. That was all well and good. Hannibal was busying himself setting everything to rights and allowing Will to lure their prey in. He was quite a skilled fisherman, and when in the city his only available prey were the minds of those around him, drawing them in with acts tailored to their particular tastes and interests. Will could make himself into whatever he must in order to catch a person, and Hannibal was ever fascinated by the masks he put on, far more convincing than the faces of the actors in a play, and far more impassioned. It was quite like a game, wondering what degree of truth Will might be showing at any moment.

“I have a prior engagement,” Chilton said, though Hannibal knew he did not, “I’m afraid it is quite impossible for me to stay. I have already overstayed my welcome, and should have left long ago.”

Will clasped his hands together, making himself the picture of innocent pleading. He had clearly identified the best way to appeal to Chilton’s sensibilities, and knew this was the most effective approach for this particular game.

“Oh, please, Doctor Chilton,” he said, “If you do not stay I don’t think I will be able to sit for Hannibal at all. I am already quite anxious, and cannot think of sitting still in silence as Hannibal works.”

Hannibal was impressed by Will’s ability to manipulate Chilton so well, as he always was when it came to the young man. Will knew just the way to speak and behave to adhere to Chilton’s pride and wishes. Hannibal knew he would ask Will about it later, unable to sate his growing appetite for the young man.

That Chilton could not see how clever and sharp Will was amazed Hannibal, though he knew it was due to Will's intentional obfuscation. He really was just a fantastic fisherman.

"You may as well stay," Hannibal said, "If Will is put out of temper, may god have mercy on my soul. He will not sit well today unless you agree to stay, so I implore you to."

That did the trick. Such tactics always did when dealing with Fredrick Chilton. He was nothing if not vain, and appealing to his vanity was almost guaranteed to earn the desired result. Hannibal could see Chilton preening and strutting already.

"Very well," Chilton said, even his tone perceptively pleased, "I shall stay, though I cannot promise it will be for the duration of the session."

Will smiled brightly, the picture of innocent delight.

"Wonderful," he said, and took his place as Hannibal began to work, "I hope you make interesting conversation. When Hannibal is not working, he sometimes says the most fantastic things."

Hannibal smiled lightly, beginning his work and pretending not to hear. Will was also baiting him, perhaps in retribution for springing this conversation on him without warning. It was only to be expected, and indicated a deeper annoyance that Will would act on later, when they were alone.

Hannibal was anxious for it.

"Well, I cannot promise to be as interesting as Doctor Lecter," Chilton demurred, "I doubt many men could. But I will do what I can to make good conversation. I will say that your good looks have seemingly bewitched Hannibal, and I am curious about it. I have never seen him so enamoured."

Chilton glanced at Hannibal, perhaps to see if he was listening. Hannibal stolidly refused to react, instead feigning complete absorption in his work as he added detail to Will's eyes to give them the proper fire. No one would look upon the finished work and dare to call Will something as banal as tabula rasa, unless they were entirely brainless.

"Hannibal is a connoisseur of beauty," Will said, "and he has his own ideas of what beauty is. I don't find it at all strange he would find something to fixate on. Whether it be myself or another, it comes as no shock to me."

Chilton nodded. He seemed pleased with Will's response, despite the fact that it was not what he had been leading Will to in the first place. He thought he could lead Will in the proper direction, or at least an adjacent one, branching off of his polite and flattering comments about Hannibal.

"My only surprise is that he has fixated on a beauty that is so fallible," Chilton said, "It would be like falling in love with a rose. Doomed to watch it wilt and die, unable to preserve the beauty that initially captured the mind."

Will's expression flickered with a mixture of annoyance and amusement. It was to be expected, this early in the conversation. Will had not yet experienced the full spectrum of Chilton's idiocy, though he could likely see where the man intended to take this line of conversation.

"A beauty that is permanent is less cherished, simply because it need not be preserved," Will countered, "I would challenge you to name a single beautiful thing that is neither manmade nor fleeting. Even the sky, in its eternity, changes daily. Hourly, even."

Chilton frowned, clearly unhappy Will had not fallen to idle vanity at the idea of his own fleeting youth. He took a long moment to attempt to think of something that adhered to Will's specifications. While he did so, Francis returned with a drink for them each. He handed the glass of whiskey to Will, who thanked him with a genuine smile, and then set Hannibal's glass of white wine on the table near him. Chilton accepted his own glass of wine with a dismissive wave to Francis, which Hannibal noted unhappily.

Hannibal was more than entertained by the way Will was stringing Chilton along, humouring his blitheness and allowing him to lead the way through the conversation, or at least believe he was leading. Chilton thought he was working with a blank slate, but Hannibal thought he might leave this house more of a blank slate than Will had ever been since birth.

"Be that as it may," Chilton drawled, as if he hadn't wasted much time thinking of this response, "Does it not bother you that your usefulness to Hannibal will end when your youth does?"

Will glanced up at Hannibal, his eyes flashing in challenge. Hannibal had never been more infatuated with him than in that moment, and he knew he would be in for a lashing of one kind or the other when Chilton was gone. Will was thoroughly irked by Chilton and his attempts to make Will insecure concerning his beauty, likely offended that he was considered so shallow as to care for that above all else, despite how he had played into the character before now.

"I find it incredibly unproductive and dull to fear over some future inevitability," Will said, almost as if he couldn't care any less on the subject, "We all age, and we all die. To worry oneself over that seems idle and foolish. As with a rose or a sunset, one should enjoy youth while one has it, and take each change in stride. Decay of a rose provides nourishment for the next generation of vegetation, and sunsets give way to stars. Ageing is simply a change in the nature of one's beauty."

Chilton didn't seem sure how to respond to that. Will had countered so wonderfully Hannibal feared he had ended the conversation entirely and thus ended the show Hannibal had invested in. That would be a disappointing result, considering how long it was likely to take for Hannibal to finish his work today.

True to form, though, Will had known exactly what he was doing.

"In that case, do you not care that Hannibal will grow bored of you?" Chilton asked, "that the end of your youth means the end of your use to him and other connoisseurs of beauty?"

Will pressed his lips together, and it was clear his amusement had been overtaken by his annoyance. He was still playing the game, but he was no longer amused by Hannibal's insistence upon it.

"The moment Hannibal becomes uninterested in me, I will find someone more interesting to spend my time with. Anyone so fixated on only physical appearance is a waste of space."

Hannibal felt a thrill run up his spine at the sharp shill in Will's tone. This was what he had been hoping for in wanting Chilton to stay. Will had begun to show his teeth, and he was baring them at Hannibal. He knew who was responsible for putting him here, though Chilton would be much simpler to be displeased with.

"Let us talk of something else," Will said before Chilton could respond, "I grow bored of your redundancy."

Fredrick flushed a bit, unsure if he should feel insulted by Will's words. Hannibal thought he likely should be, but he likely wouldn't allow Will to get such a reaction out of him just now. Not when he thought he was still in control of the conversation.

"Very well. What would you like to discuss instead?" he asked.

Will's eyes sparkled at once, and Hannibal thought he knew what topic Will would choose. If he was right, Hannibal would almost have been tempted to think Will brought it up for his benefit. Will could likely see that Hannibal enjoyed discussing it whenever it came up. The only reason he didn't think that was the case was because he knew Will himself found the topic fascinating and brought it up whenever the opportunity arose.

"Have you heard of Jeremy Olmstead?" Will asked.

Chilton frowned.

"While that name does sound familiar, I'm afraid I cannot recall where I might have heard it from. I expect you will enlighten me."

Will's smile grew sharp, and Hannibal could not have been more pleased. Will was putting on quite the show, and any price would be well worth it. He would pay later, and he would not begrudge the price Will chose, no matter what it was.

"The latest victim of Jack the Ripper," Will said, "This one was displayed like that medical illustration to show all possible penetrating wounds. Surely you're familiar with it, being a doctor yourself."

Will was concealing his enthusiasm admirably, though Hannibal could still see that intense and burning fascination in his gaze. Chilton was none the wiser, and he had to fumble for an answer in the face of Will's expectation. He was entirely unprepared for this nature of conversation, and didn't know what exactly Will wanted of him. Most people who wasted their time speaking with Chilton would shy away from this topic, or would only speak of it in hushed whispers, as if being heard talking of such things could attract misfortune.

“When did this happen?” Chilton asked, “Surely, it was quite recent, as I have not heard of it yet.”

Will nodded, then cast Hannibal a faux apologetic glance for the movement. It served him as a way to gauge Hannibal’s reactions to their conversation, no doubt, and Hannibal was sure he could see how pleased Hannibal was with it.

“It was in this morning's paper,” Will said, “I think it would have been left out almost entirely until next week if Freddie Lounds were not so ambitious and persistent. Inspector Crawford is likely to have a conniption due to her any day now.”

Chilton nodded, his expression growing more curious. Will had let slip something Chilton thought he could use to make a few assumptions about him. Little did he know, Will was still stringing him along with the efficiency of someone who did it as a profession. He did not know anything about Will Graham that Will himself did not want him to know.

“You certainly seem to know much about the investigation, and the politics around it,” he said, “It almost makes me wonder if you might be involved in some way.”

Will laughed, and his face was flushed with his mixture of emotions. He was absolutely beautiful. Hannibal was more pleased than ever to have the privilege to put his likeness to canvas, and have Will’s presence in his life. He considered all the years before meeting Will to be grey and colourless, now, having learned what true colour and vibrance was.

“As you have said, my good looks are a fleeting thing. I must take advantage of them while I have the chance. But tell me your thoughts on this case. What kind of man could kill someone and proceed to impale them on so many instruments?”

Chilton looked a bit green at the thought, and Hannibal mused that he really was quite a poor doctor. Even the thought of such tame gore as this turned his stomach.

“Clearly, it would have to be someone with some medical background,” he said, a bit of strength having gone from his usually boisterous voice, “someone without remorse or conscience. A monster who delights in the ugly.”

Will mused over that for a long moment, his eyes bright.

“The ugly?” he challenged, “I was led to believe the illustration of the wound man was meant to elicit sympathy in the viewer, and force the students of medicine to face the truth of a human life being in their hands. In my mind, such an act of pure humanity is beautiful, but perhaps you know differently, educated man that you are.”

Hannibal would have laughed aloud if he had not committed himself to silence. Fredrick clearly had not been prepared for verbal banter at such a level as Will offered. One of Will’s greatest qualities was his stubborn refusal to lower himself to the level of social niceties. He could be seen as blunt or brash, but it was just the naked honesty of his thoughts. Hannibal adored him for this complete genuineness, even when playing a character. It was a rare and dying skill, and Will did it quite beautifully.

“The illustration may have that purpose and meaning, yes,” Chilton said, trying valiantly to rescue what control of the conversation he felt he had once had, “but the recreation in flesh would certainly be a mockery of that. Turning something meant for good into an instrument of evil. Do you not see that as ugly?”

Will raised an eyebrow, apparently impressed by Fredrick’s retort. He had not thought Chilton had the brains to turn it back on him in that way. Even so, he was not at all daunted by the man and his assertions. Will was entirely confident in his own ability to steer this conversation and get what he wanted from Chilton.

“If I thought that was the intention of our Ripper, I certainly would call it ugly,” Will conceded, “Though I believe they mean something entirely other by their actions. I see it as an homage to the original creator. Bringing an art piece to life through their dedication and admiration for the previous great mind. Would not any artist be flattered to find someone had made their fantasy into a reality?”

Hannibal could not stop himself from smiling at that. He thought it more than likely Will had phrased it that way for his benefit. He thought it truly would be an honour to see a piece of his art come to life, though he currently had a living, breathing art piece standing before him. Will was more beautiful than any painting, and the only unfortunate side to his beauty was what Chilton had been so ardently trying to say earlier. Will would someday grow old and die. His beauty would be lost, while the creations Hannibal had made in his image would last and likely never fade as he did.

The thought brought a certain level of mourning to Hannibal’s heart, and he wished he could preserve Will as he did his art, cover him in varnish and put him on display.

But a mind could not be painted as a face could, and that was what Hannibal really wanted to preserve from Will.

“I suppose so,” Chilton said slowly, clearly unsure how he was supposed to react when Will was speaking in such a way about a horror plaguing the people, “Though artists who depict death and pain rarely wish for it to be made real. Those who do are as deranged as the killer himself.”

Will tipped his head minutely, curious about something, though it was clearly not what Chilton had said. Hannibal doubted Will found Chilton any more interesting than a pestering insect. It was more likely he had experienced an epiphany, and this had led to a full avalanche of revelation that he would be considering about the Ripper.

“Do you suppose that on any real evidence, or can you simply not imagine any sane man wishing pain on another?” Will asked.

Hannibal could see Will was growing tired of Fredrick and wished him gone. The painting was nearly finished, so he planned to send the nuisance on his way momentarily.

“Why, I suppose it because I cannot imagine that,” Chilton asserted immediately, “no man in his right mind desires pain for others.”

Will's eyes darkened, and Hannibal knew he had gone somewhere deep within himself. He made a mental note to inquire about it once Chilton had left. If he was afforded the opportunity amidst his punishment for playing games Will had not consented to beforehand.

"I can," Will said darkly, "I can imagine it just fine. And you are a fool to think so. Even you have had an enemy or two whom you would like to see suffer. Generals in battle wish for the pain of their opponents. Victims of a crime wish for pain on the perpetrator. None of these are any less sane than you, yet in your ignorance you would condemn them. You do not think before you speak, Doctor Chilton."

Chilton's face took on blotches of colour in his humiliation, and he turned to Hannibal, opening his mouth to prepare to excuse himself.

"I have finished," Hannibal declared with a smile, turning to his companions as if unaware what was transpiring, "Why Fredrick. Your colour is positively hectic. Are you feeling ill?"

Chilton frowned and downed the last of his drink, stalking over to see the finished work, likely hoping to find fault in it. Hannibal doubted he would, and would be insulted if he could.

"What do you intend to do with it?" he asked instead, "put it on display, and I am sure the world will marvel. All will know your name, Hannibal. It is a marvellous piece."

Will came over, his footsteps as light as those of a deer. He smiled at the painting, clearly pleased with both himself and Hannibal.

"Hannibal promised I could have it," Will said, "If I want it."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at the way Will had said it.

"Do you not?" he asked, feeling a genuine pang of concern that Will might not want it. If it stayed here, it would mock him with that knowledge. If it went anywhere other than Will's home, those who spoke of it to him would be causing him mental anguish. Will had to take it, or it would have to be destroyed.

Will flashed a smile, and Hannibal knew his wording had been an intentional barb to make him worry, if only for a moment. It was the start of his punishment for Will being forced to speak with Fredrick. Will could be fabulously cruel. There would be more to come once they were alone, and Hannibal felt his heart skip at the idea.

"At risk of revealing my own vanity, I do want it," Will said, "I would not want it anywhere else."

Hannibal returned the smile, reassured and satisfied for the time being.

"Neither would I," he said, "it was made for you alone."

Chilton chuffed derisively, clearly unhappy to be ignored.

“I really must be going, Hannibal,” he said, “It was a pleasure to spend the afternoon with you, and to meet the charming Will Graham.”

Hannibal was not sorry to see him go, but he did everything a gracious host was expected to. Fredrick was off, without trying to prolong the visit any further. That was fine by Hannibal, and he thought Will had no objections to it either.

Will was waiting by the painting, whiskey in hand, when Hannibal returned to him.

2

Chapter Summary

Will gives Hannibal a piece of his mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You are quite bad, Count Lecter," Will said, not bothering to turn and greet Hannibal. Instead, he looked at the painting, as if scrutinising every detail of the work.

The light from the window caught on his hair and shone like polished ebony, once more capturing Hannibal's mind and soul with the desire to take Will and never let him go. To incorporate Will into himself so they could never be parted, and devour and be consumed in turn, like an ouroboros made by the two of them, where the division was so blurred and convoluted not a surgeon could separate them.

"Am I?" Hannibal asked, "In all my years yet I have never been called bad. What cause have you to do so?"

As he spoke, Hannibal stepped around Will and took up his glass of wine. The sun had gone lower in the sky outside, lending length and dynamics to the beams of light streaming in through the large picture windows. Will looked just as well in this lighting as in any other, and Hannibal could hardly take his eyes off the younger man. It was genuinely worrying how entirely Will captured his attention by doing nothing but being present, that Hannibal could not think of hardly anything else. If his infatuation grew any stronger or deeper, he would never be capable of thinking of his work or hobbies again, and would become an obvious fool.

"How poorly you behaved towards your friend," Will reprimanded, "Doctor Chilton was so at a loss for what to do by the end of it that I fear he may never call on you again."

Hannibal huffed a laugh. Will was teasing him, no doubt being aware of Hannibal's true feelings towards Fredrick Chilton, and using his willingness to invite the other doctor into his home to mock him.

"A disgrace I shall have to bear," he said, "but, dear Will, you are the one who spoke to him all this afternoon. I hardly said a word to him that I could have offended him by."

Will turned to Hannibal, his cheeks flushed with pleasure and frustration at once. His hair fell into his face and was quickly brushed away by one of his pale, calloused hands. He was so glorious a vision Hannibal could have consumed him entirely in that moment, given the chance.

“Exactly so,” Will admonished, “He was your guest, a stranger to me, and you left me to entertain him, all the while you feigned muteness. That was an unkind trick on the both of us. And he was in the mood to aggravate me, I know it. I would not think it beyond you to have asked him to irritate me intentionally, just so you might be entertained by my unfortunate position.”

Hannibal smiled, unable to keep himself from showing his true adoration for Will in a moment like this.

“The weather is quite nice. Won’t you take a walk in the garden with me?” Hannibal asked, setting his empty glass down on the table and looking to Will expectantly.

Will sighed and threw back the rest of his own drink in a way Hannibal had only seen Americans do. And a few drunkards in a bar, when he chanced to meet one. For Will, the gesture had all the appeal the others lacked. Will could do nothing that would lessen his beauty in Hannibal’s eyes, or if he could he had not yet allowed Hannibal to know of it.

“The air in here is becoming quite stuffy,” Will said, as if he must offer himself an excuse to accept the offer, “let us clear our heads a bit. I may even find it in myself to forgive you for treating your friend so poorly today.”

Hannibal offered his arm to Will, who accepted it with the air of reluctant obligation, and led him to the garden.

“What has led you to believe Fredrick is a friend of mine?” Hannibal asked.

Will let go of Hannibal’s arm and walked to an Amaranthus Caudatus, trailing his fingers along the ropey blossoms. His expression was all disinterested casualness, but Hannibal knew there was something underneath that face that he would need to uncover before their true conversation could begin.

“He calls you by your first name, and he is very comfortable in your home,” Will said, “what other conclusion might I come to with that in mind?”

Hannibal smiled and shook his head. He understood that Will desired for him to forsake Fredrick, if only to please Will here and now by appeasing his mind and telling him he cared more about Will than any other guests he might have. It was times like this that had Hannibal nearly convinced Will must return his obsessive infatuation, and he preserved them all under glass in his mind so he could experience it again whenever the desire struck him. Hannibal was always more than happy to jump through what hoops Will set before him, just to see him flush with pleasure.

“Fredrick Chilton thinks he is my friend, but he is mistaken. He has the ability to assume he is welcome in places he really ought not to be, and to be comfortable in situations he has not been invited to. He would have acted similarly had he shown up at your door unannounced and been admitted in your surprise. No, he is not my friend.”

Will’s expression broke apart, and dark, cruel amusement showed on his features. Such a look was incredibly becoming on Will, his angelic features giving it the divinely tempting

qualities of the fruit in the garden of Eden, and Hannibal was a more than willing Eve in the face of such a glorious delicacy. He hoped no other person on earth would be witness to such emotions from Will, that they would be reserved for times like this, when they were alone together and he may drink his fill.

“You do not have friends, Count Lecter,” Will said mockingly, “Every time I accuse you of having one, you object and offer a solid argument against such an idea. No, you do not have friends at all. How lonely you must be.”

Hannibal followed as Will walked further through the garden, wandering down paths he knew well after all the hours he had spent there. Hannibal had come to learn that Will hated very much to be confined indoors for extended periods of time. When Will sat for Hannibal, he often had to be afforded breaks in order to walk in the fresh air of the garden. Hannibal had sketched Will out here as well, finding the light and colours complimentary to Will’s entire being. Would the weather cooperate with his efforts, he would have painted Will in the garden, so right was the atmosphere for his beauty, but London was more often than not dreary and damp. Not conducive to such artistic efforts.

“I consider you my friend, Will,” Hannibal said, knowing it was what Will wanted him to say.

Will laughed. It was a pleasant sound, possibly Hannibal’s favourite in all the world. It was free and bright, like the sound of a river through the woods. Like a river through woods, there were also shadows hidden along the length of the sound, shifting and changing as the wind combed through the leaves and branches of the trees along the bank. It was this darkness that so compelled Hannibal and drew him to the boy. The thought that under such a beautiful countenance hid a mind with shadows as black as his own.

“That is only one,” Will said, “You may have a single friend, but you still do not have friends in the plural. Whatever you did to fill that loneliness before we met I may never know surely. What a sad life it must be for you.”

Hannibal was not stung by Will’s words. He did not care to have any friends in his life other than Will. Will was all he needed, and it did not matter to him if the entirety of Europe burned down around them. If Will stayed by his side, he would be satisfied.

“When Chilton spoke of not wishing pain on others, you went somewhere,” Hannibal said, and Will turned sharply to level him with his dark gaze, “I could see it in your eyes. You were at once far away. I am insatiably curious to know where it was you went.”

Will glowered for a moment, as if insulted Hannibal could see through him so clearly and dared to ask about those secret spaces in his mind. Hannibal knew he would be forgiven in an instant, though. Will was also lonely, and cherished their friendship nearly as much as Hannibal did. He would not end their acquaintance because of Hannibal’s prying. He had not to this point.

“You are attempting to distract me, so I cannot show you how lonely and sad your life is,” Will said, tilting his chin up proudly, as if he were a lord looking down on one of his subjects. Hannibal often felt as if he were just that, a peasant in the face of Will’s riches. “While I

accept the change of topic, do not expect me to forget that I intend to beat you about the head with your own sad existence upon a later date."

Hannibal was delighted.

Will turned back and bent to smell the Sweet Williams that grew by the honeysuckle. He was making Hannibal wait, because they both knew he would answer, but he was showing he truly was upset with Hannibal for his behaviour this afternoon. Hannibal relished in his cruelty. He believed he was the only one Will showed it to in this way. Everywhere else, Will was the epitome of politeness and courtesy, though perhaps his honestly unnerved some. Only Hannibal was gifted the chance to see the potential of Will's mind as a weapon.

"I was at the scene of the crime," Will said at last, "I saw the picture in the newspaper and knew exactly where Jeremy Olmstead was left. I have been there a few times, and I know exactly what it is like. I went there, in my mind, and saw him there. I looked at the entire work, and I felt as if I had put it there. I was the Ripper, for a moment."

Hannibal stared in awe as Will spoke. Will's fingers plucked absently at the petals of a sweet William. He seemed not precisely agitated, but somewhat bothered. Perhaps he could not identify the source of his own reactions, and thus feared what potential they might reveal within himself.

"I felt as if I was looking out through his eyes, and saw Olmstead the way the Ripper saw him. I felt only disgust for him, and satisfaction that I had used him as a medium to create something beautiful. Something that held more meaning than any moment of his life before. Olmstead had been elevated from detritus to art, by the hands of our Ripper, and it was beautiful."

Will turned to face Hannibal, and Hannibal saw he was afraid. He was frightened Hannibal would be horrified by what he had just confessed to. That he would feel so testified of his attachment to Hannibal and their relationship, and the fact that Hannibal had been able to conceal the innermost thoughts of his heart to this point. It was both a reassurance and a torment to Hannibal. He wanted Will to know every stitch of the disguise he wore for the world, and use his cunning to tear it away. He wanted Will to know him entirely, and walk beside him in all things.

"Will Graham, what god breathed you to life I do not know. It is unfair to the rest of us that you hold the monopoly on beauty and intelligence, and now show you have some incredible talent to take on the thoughts of others. Do you fear I will reject your company on this count?"

Will's face flushed again and he stood to his full height. Hannibal could see both relief and frustration in Will's expression. Will felt he was being made fun of, and in a way that was the truth. Hannibal found it incredible that Will would feel any insecurity about this newly revealed talent, and perhaps he had mocked him for it in part. His intention was not to harm, though, because he truly could not imagine Will would impress him more in any way.

"Do not mock me, Hannibal Lecter," Will said lowly, his countenance darkening with contained fury, "I am meant to dine with Inspector Crawford tonight. I shall not be able to

keep from trembling, knowing what I know now. If I spill my wine all on myself in his presence, might he not take it as a guilty conscience? A man meant to detect such things, and I now feel as if I am the killer he is searching for. My fear of him is second only to my fear that you will find this horrible of me."

Hannibal stepped forward and took Will's face in his hands. It stopped Will's anxious speaking, and captured his attention fully. That was what Hannibal desired more than anything, to have Will's complete focus on him. He felt as if he was at the gates of heaven when Will looked at him like this.

"I am not horrified by you, Will," Hannibal said, "My muse and inspiration. The only one I have ever had an intelligent conversation with. You are more beautiful to me than ever, and I cannot fathom wanting to see less of you than I do now."

Will's plush lips had parted when Hannibal had begun speaking, and he had reached up to take hold of Hannibal's arms, almost as if to anchor himself against a tide. Now, his gaze flicked from Hannibal's own eyes to Hannibal's mouth, and there was a brief pause before Will was surging forward and capturing Hannibal's lips in a fervent kiss.

Hannibal was surprised by the action, but did not miss the opportunity now it was here. He held on to Will's face, keeping him there as he breathed in the boy like a man half drowned and Will was the very air. He had been tormented by thoughts and dreams of this since the day he had met Will Graham, and now that it had become his reality he refused to let go of it. Will tasted of whiskey and oak, as if Hannibal was breathing in a forest. Will was soft and warm against him, entirely solid and real and fit into Hannibal like they had been carved from the same piece of marble.

They pulled apart, and Will looked at Hannibal with wide eyes. Again, he seemed frightened, but he did not pull away. Hannibal would not have let him had he tried.

"My apologies," Will murmured, "I should not have done that."

Hannibal slid his hands into Will's hair, pleased by the soft gloss of his curls against the pads of his fingers. It was like plunging his hands into a basket of silk scraps, so smooth and pleasant was the sensation. Just as he had imagined it would be and more. He was intent to keep Will to himself for the future eternity.

"On the contrary," Hannibal said, "You should do whatever you like, and damn the consequences. Not the earth nor sky could deny you what you want, and I certainly will not."

Will's eyes were bright and filled with pleasure, both from Hannibal's words and his touch. Hannibal thought he understood why Will had kissed him, then.

"Am I merely a distraction to you, Will Graham?" he asked.

Will's cheeks flushed darker, entirely becoming on his complexion, especially without his usual beard. Hannibal had an affection for Will's beard, just as all other things that were Will's, but there was a certain pleasure in seeing Will clean shaven, making him appear all the more youthful and bright. He was like an angel from the ceiling of the Sistine chapel.

“Shame on you for thinking so,” Will said, his tone that of a petulant child being caught in the act of disobedience, “You know very well you are not so little to me.”

Hannibal pulled gently on Will’s hair and watched as his pupils blew wide and his lips parted again. He looked not unlike an angel in a Botticelli painting, in that moment, and Hannibal ached to paint him again already, though the portrait had not yet dried on the canvas within his home. He had an idea Will would be exasperated with him if he knew of this intense desire to depict him again, as he often voiced his boredom being nothing but an image under Hannibal’s hands.

“You kissed me only so you may have this to think on while dining with the Crawfords’,” Hannibal accused, “so you may not behave as if you are guilty in his presence.”

Will turned his head away, looking toward a willow tree at the edge of the garden. His eyes had darkened to the shade of a storming ocean, and Hannibal thought he was again somewhere deep within his mind. What Hannibal would give or do to follow Will down those well worn paths through his thoughts, to explore the depths of what made up Will Graham. It was one thing he desired perhaps more than anything else.

“I have often thought of kissing you,” Will said slowly, “though I had not expected to do so in reality. The thought of Jack mistaking me for a murderer and consequently being locked up spurred me forth. It may well be my last and only chance to do so, and in that case I thought not to waste it. If you rejected me, it would overshadow any fear or pain brought on by my guilty behaviour at dinner.”

Hannibal could not help but grin at that. It was now his turn to tease the young man, in reciprocity for all the mocking words Will had said to him today after their game with Chilton.

“My rejection of you would cause such distress and pain that a conviction for a crime you are innocent of would be lesser?” Hannibal inquired, fascinated that Will’s feelings towards him might be equal to his own for Will.

Will pursed his lips, the action making him look all the more youthful and pretty. Hannibal did itch so to draw him again. He would never be satisfied until every piece of paper he owned was adorned with Will’s likeness.

“When speaking with you, I am so compelled by your voice that I can scarce hide a single thought in my mind or abstain from speaking it aloud for you to judge,” he said, again sounding petulant and petty, “If I had committed some egregious act, I would be caught if only you asked me to say what I had done. My curse to bear is the voice you leave in my head.”

Will pulled away, shaking his head and flinging his curls wildly around, making Hannibal itch to take hold of them and hang on, never letting go of Will.

Will walked down one of the garden paths, Hannibal helpless but to follow. Will was the only man on this earth that could command Hannibal in such a way, make him feel lost without his presence, his warmth and darkness. Hannibal was not beholden to any man’s whims but Will,

and that should have been entirely more frightening than it was. Instead, Hannibal was elated by the thought of being subject to Will, a god who was as cruel and loving as any thought up by man.

“Your rejection would mean the end of my very life,” Will said, agitated and walking briskly with his nervous energy, “I would not dare show my face anywhere again, and I would weep over every gift you have ever given me. How could I look at that painting, and see how you made it with such love, knowing you loved only the face and not the heart, mind, or soul behind it? I would die of heartbreak at once.”

Hannibal was amazed by Will’s words, more so than his always startling Adonis-like appearance. That Will could feel so strongly on the matter, yet risked it despite, told Hannibal many amazing things about the boy that he could hardly believe. The first was that Will’s affections for Hannibal may indeed match or even rival Hannibal’s obsession with Will, something he had thought an impossibility before this moment. Another was that Will had truly entered the mind of the Ripper so deeply that he felt responsible for the crimes they had committed as if they were his own. It was likely Will knew more about the one they called Jack the Ripper than even the police.

Hannibal wished desperately he could open Will’s skull and taste his thoughts without killing the boy. To do so would mean losing him, and that was not an acceptable option. Most especially now Hannibal had made this discovery.

“You must dine with me instead,” Hannibal said, “I’m certain no grudge could be held against you, even by Jack Crawford, and you seem quite incapable of enjoying yourself under such conditions. I believe you would have a much better chance of enjoying the evening if you were to spend it with me.”

Will turned to Hannibal with a curious expression, though he was of a mind to be upset with Hannibal for his words. Hannibal thought it likely his anger would have succeeded were he not so excited by what had just transpired between them.

“I am right to always think you a hedonist,” Will said, “All you ever think of is pleasure, whether it be yours or mine. I will not dine with you tonight, as it would be quite rude after I had been invited by Jack Crawford. Imagine my guilt next time I were to see him, if I snubbed him now on the grounds of my fearing discovery. If he were to ask why I could not make it! I am not so talented at lying when it truly matters, Hannibal, though I have no doubt that you are. No, I must go, or else I may convince myself I truly am the killer.”

Hannibal was disappointed, but not nearly dissuaded. Now that he was aware Will returned his feelings, and they had crossed that first terrifying boundary of addressing it, he would be dissuaded by very little in his ambitions to possess that which he desired.

“If not dinner, then return to me after you have left the Crawfords,” he said, “for both our pleasure. I do not think I could stand to not see you again until tomorrow, knowing not the time I have wasted thinking you indifferent to me.”

Will seemed incapable of keeping back the smile that seemed to Hannibal to illuminate the entirety of the dozing world. He was quite sure he would never feel Will was anything other

than an ethereal being sent to earth solely to show humans what true beauty is.

“Perhaps I must count myself a hedonist as well,” Will said, returning to Hannibal and curling a hand into the fabric of his clothes, “I cannot think of anything that could stop me from returning here tonight.”

Hannibal grinned.

“You would return even if you have been arrested for the murder of Jeremy Olmstead?” he asked.

Will’s smile turned bright like the sharpened edge of a blade, and his eyes danced with surprised pleasure. It was quite a dangerous expression, and Hannibal was thrilled by the appearance of it on Will’s countenance.

“The distraction I chose has already begun to perform,” he said, “I think I will be marvellous company at dinner, unlike my usual dourness, so filled am I with the feel of your lips against mine.”

Hannibal was all at once jealous of Crawford, that he would have the pleasure of Will’s company while he was in such good temper. He considered for a moment taking hold of Will and not allowing him to go after all. Hannibal would like to lock him away and glut on Will’s beauty alone. Jack Crawford did not know how to appreciate such a masterpiece as Will was, nor was he even aware Will was such a thing. No one in the world but Hannibal understood what a rarity and treasure Will Graham was, and only he could worship him in the way he deserved to be worshipped.

Will released Hannibal’s clothes, moving to step away, but Hannibal seized him and pulled him into another kiss, keeping him there until neither of them had breath.

“I really must be going,” Will said, though there was a look in his eyes as if he thought of staying after all, “I am already to be late if I do not make haste.”

Hannibal felt a sudden shift in his own desires, wanting Jack Crawford to see Will like this. He wanted Will’s high colour and good temper to be remarked on, and for it to serve as a reminder to Will of who had caused it. He wanted rumours to start because of how flushed and pleased Will was after leaving the home of the respectable Count Hannibal Lecter.

“Of course,” Hannibal said, “I will have Francis retrieve your coat.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Dinner with the Crawfords. Jack's Pov.

3

Chapter Summary

What does Jack think about our young Will?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack frowned a bit as he watched Will Graham take his seat at the table. The young man was constantly sober and serious, so much so Jack had wondered often if Will ever found true enjoyment in anything. His cynicism was curious to Jack, who thought most of the youth these days were far too pleased and joyful, considering the things that went on in the shadows.

Bella had been the one to discover the youth and draw him into their circle. She was charmed both by his pleasant face and his dark moods, claiming company these days lacked in anything sincere, and his frown was more real than the smiles she was met with all day.

Tonight, however, Will seemed pleased by something. Perhaps it was only remarkable because to see the boy smile at all was a rarity, and tonight he seemed all but unaware of his own expression. Jack saw Bella had also marked the change in the boy, and meant to inquire about it the moment she felt she could.

“You do not make a habit of being late, Will,” Jack said, “what could have been an obstacle for you tonight?”

Will’s eyes seemed to glint with excitement, and a fresh blossom of colour bloomed in his cheeks, reminding Jack just how young and full of life the boy was.

“I apologise for it, inspector Crawford,” Will said, though his smile hindered him from seeming entirely contrite, “Count Lecter was intent on monopolising my time today, and I could scarcely escape him.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at the boy, wondering what Hannibal Lecter might have done or said to make his mood change so drastically. It was nearly like Jack was sitting at dinner with a stranger. It was a remarkable shift, and amazing to him that Will had contained this bright eyed and pleasant persona within him all this time without ever revealing it to Jack before now.

“Has Hannibal asked you to sit for him?” Bella asked, apparently delighted at the thought, “he does such wonderful drawings, and I’m certain he would find you handsome enough.”

Will's smile was bright and pleased. He always seemed to enjoy speaking with Bella in a different way than he did with Jack. When Will had Jack alone, he seemed fascinated by the crimes Jack dealt with, and particularly the violent or deadly ones. In those conversations, Will would be especially sober and his eyes would darken to nearly cobalt. But with Bella, his eyes were powder blue and his voice was all light politeness. Jack could not make sense of him.

"It seems to me all he does is ask me to sit for him," Will said with mock exasperation, "I have nearly a dozen drawings of myself, and those are only the ones he felt most proud of. Today I sat for him to finish my portrait in paints, and it really is a magnificent piece. It took ages for him to finish it, and I was quite tired of it all by the time he did."

Perhaps that was what had Will in such excellent humour today. It was nothing more serious than the release from a tedious task and the completion of a good picture. Jack was satisfied with that answer, as Will was yet very young, and deserved to be taken by frivolous fancy every so often. It was a sign of good health, at least in Jack Crawford's mind.

"Oh, that is wonderful," Bella said, and it was clear she really was pleased to hear it, "I had not thought Hannibal would take quite such a liking as that to you, but it pleases me that he has. You are both such intelligent men, and without someone matching that level to speak to, I rather think you would both wither away like a flower in autumn."

Will laughed, and it was a light, musical laugh Jack had never heard him produce. When Will laughed with Jack, it was always low and cynical, as if his derision for the whole human race was the only amusement the boy felt.

"I hesitate to agree with you, only because I feel to do so would be an offence to your husband. Surely, you consider Jack to be an intelligent man. He is the head of Scotland Yard, after all."

Bella turned to Jack with one raised brow, clearly of the mood to challenge him in this and find her own amusement at his expense.

"While Jack is quite intelligent, yes, I do not think his mind is a match for yours, Will," she said, "Jack's thoughts are so fixed in his mind, and he very rarely changes. You and Hannibal both seem to me to change as quickly as the weather, as if all of life is a game to you and you must hold whatever opinion makes the given moment most amusing."

Will considered that for a moment, different expressions flickering across his features to betray the thoughts passing through his mind. Jack always found moments like this fascinating, because Will could be expressive, but it was nearly impossible to truly guess what he was thinking by merely watching his face change. He was as unpredictable as the weather, that much was sure, and Jack was curious to hear what he would say in response to Bella's musings.

"I suppose that is a fair evaluation of our personalities, Mrs Crawford," he said at length, almost ruefully, "I suppose I should do what I can to surprise you from now on. You are a keen judge of character, and you have concealed it from me until now."

Bella laughed lightly and Jack smiled. He was always pleased to see Bella enjoying herself, and Will seemed to be a reliable source of amusement for her. He also served as a competent consultant for Jack, when he was befuddled by any of his cases.

Jack should not discuss his work with Will, technically speaking. It was not proper for him to tell Will the details of murders and assaults. The problem seemed to be that Will was clever enough to put things together, and Jack felt compelled to talk to him past the point where it was no longer wise.

The compulsion to talk was a poor trait for any policeman, and Jack had long gone without it. He rarely said a word about work to his wife, much less his friends or acquaintances. He did not know what about Will Graham reawakened the desire in him, but as of yet he had not been made to regret their conversations. Will was often a great help, and Jack only wished he could convince the boy to join the force.

“I was not aware you and Count Lecter had even been acquainted,” Jack said, “you do not seem to run in the same social circles, and I cannot imagine under what circumstances you would chance to meet.”

Will nodded.

“It was quite by accident, as if happens,” he said, his smile turning nostalgic as if they had met many years ago, “you are familiar with Alana Bloom? Yes, I know you are. I had been reading a book and came upon something I fancied she would have interesting thoughts on. I had a mind to call on her that very moment, without anything else to do that morning.”

Bela was transfixed by Will’s story, likely comparing it to the novels she herself enjoyed. It did sound somewhat fantastic, but Jack hadn’t known Will for lying in even the most trivial situations. He had no doubt this tale was nothing but the truth, though he would not have thought Will incapable of saying it in just such a way as to intrigue Bella so he may amuse her through the retelling.

“I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I physically collided with a gentleman who had just left her home,” Will continued, his high colour remaining with his bright eyes and mood, “As I profusely apologised, the man interrupted me to ask if I would consider sitting for a portrait.” Will laughed at the memory of such an absurd happening. “I was quite stunned and unsure what to say. Additionally, I had quite forgotten what I had been doing before our collision. He apologised to me as well, saying he was not in the habit of springing such proposals upon strangers, and noticed the novel I held in my hand. It must have been familiar to him, because he smiled and inquired if I had finished it.”

Will shook his head in wonder. Jack now thought it more likely than not that he was telling the story in such a dramatic way entirely that Bella would find it interesting. If he had been telling it to Jack alone, he would have been much more concise and clinical. Such was Will’s nature, when it came to the pair of them. He knew just how to speak to each of them to please them most. Jack sometimes felt nervous about it, recognizing he might easily manipulate either of them if he so chose.

“At that moment, I remembered my errand and told the man what I had meant to do. His smile remained as he told me he had just left Alana Bloom, and she was quite busy at the moment. He offered to discuss it over lunch, introducing himself as Count Hannibal Lecter. Well, I was quite helpless to refuse the invitation. You must know how it is hard to resist Hannibal’s charm.”

Will sighed, shaking his head again. Jack thought he found the story as pleasant and entertaining as Bella did, even though it was his own.

“That is the core of it,” he said with a light laugh, “At lunch, we discovered exactly what Bella believes. Our interests are more aligned than anyone would have believed to start with. Hannibal has hardly left me alone since then.”

Bella was delighted, and Jack found the story nearly too fantastic to believe, even knowing Will was not lying. It sounded like something that would have been planned or written, like a novel. Even then, Jack knew Will was not in the habit of lying. He even thought Will might be entirely incapable of lying. His nature was just entirely candid and honest at all times, even when he was being polite and holding his tongue about his less kind thoughts. His very manner seemed to reveal the fact that he could not speak an untruth. At least that was what Jack felt.

“It seems as if you two were meant to meet, in such a case,” Jack said.

He was surprised when the pleasant expression of Will’s face dropped off at once, and he looked at Jack with a dark mood.

“You must never say such a thing to Hannibal,” Will said, his tone low and serious, much more like what Jack was used to from him, “he has already such a fantastical view of things, this may lead him to believe he is a God.”

Jack was too stunned by the sudden shift in Will’s mood to form a cohesive reaction. Bella laughed, though, and nearly clapped her hands in delight. As she did, Will’s face lit with that sunny grin he had been sporting all evening, and he winked at Jack.

“Forgive me, Jack,” Will said, “Perhaps it was an unkind joke, but I felt you had grown too comfortable with my good humour. I know you are not accustomed to it.”

Jack smiled, still stunned and bewildered. He felt shaken, and he wondered if he had been mistaken about Will’s nature entirely. That act made him wonder if Will might not in reality be quite a skilled deceiver, capable of a great many lies. If Will ever made up his mind to deceive someone, that performance had Jack convinced no one would be the wiser. He could not be sure if Will would ever take advantage of such a skill, aside from the occasional light humoured joke such as this, but it did cause him to wonder on it.

“I am beginning to understand what my wife said about you and Count Lecter,” he said, “That was clearly a behaviour meant to amuse yourself by changing your attitude to interact with the atmosphere differently. I had thought she said it mostly in jest, but I see now that I was wrong. I shall now always be on edge, thinking that you mean to manipulate me for your own entertainment.”

Will huffed a soft laugh, much more like the ones Jack had grown accustomed to during their conversations. This dinner was proving revelatory in many ways. Jack had yet to decide if that was a good thing. He might have preferred to remain unaware of Will's ability to deceive, rather than know at any moment he could begin telling lies without showing a hint of dishonesty outwardly that Jack would be able to see.

"I would expect you to already be on edge always," Will said, "a career law enforcement officer as you are. The things you must see every day would set anyone anxious."

Jack nodded, wondering if Will had seen the morning newspaper. He most likely had, much to Jack's dismay. Will did make a habit of keeping informed about current investigations, whether they were Jack's or not. Jack wished there was a way to put a stop to Freddie Lounds and her articles. She had made it her business to know far more than she ought, and to publish it for the entire population of London. The photograph was just another part of the whole debacle that got thoroughly under Jack's skin.

"I know generally what is to be expected from criminals, Will," Jack said, "but it is the gentle class I find tedious. Perhaps I have not made a study of them as I should have, but it is those like you and the Count that leave me concerned that I am always being laughed at when I leave a gathering."

Will mused over that for a minute, clearly finding the concept amusing. Jack wondered if it was amusing because Will knew his fears to be based on reality, or because they were absurd to even consider. He had no way of knowing, and no way to be sure Will would tell him the truth on the matter after tonight's revelations.

"You are not a subject of mockery, except in the circles Miss Lounds frequents," Will said, sounding as honest as ever, "but I find it curious that you think of criminals as predictable. What think you of your latest man, who they call the Ripper?"

Jack frowned. He was honestly set back by the case of these Ripper killings. The killer did not seem to follow the regular pattern, and had not left any usable evidence by which Jack could even begin to track him down.

Furthermore, the name had been given by the press, Freddie Lounds again. The name *Jack* had been used specifically in order to cause Crawford distress and frustration, and it worked well. That Freddie had given his name to the killer he was chasing irked him to no end, but Jack was working past it. He still wished there was something to be done to stop Lounds from spreading so much information about the case around the streets of London. It made Jack's job all the more difficult.

"While our Ripper does not appear to follow the same patterns as other killers, I am confident he is driven by the same motivations and will therefore make a mistake which will prove his downfall. Any man who runs through the streets, killing, will make an error."

Will's eyes shone with interest and his dark intelligence, making Jack wonder if he disagreed about the Ripper. But it was not proper dinner conversation, and he should not pursue it any further.

“We should discuss it more at a later date,” Will said, “It is not appropriate for the table, but I’m afraid I will not be able to linger tonight. I am quite tired, and must be getting to bed.”

Jack didn’t think Will appeared so exhausted as that. His eyes shone with pleasure and his hands were flitting about as if full of pent up energy. Regardless, Jack said nothing of it, and they finished their dinner.

Only an hour later, Jack sat in the library with Bella, attempting to read a book. His mind continually strayed to Will Graham and the boy’s strange behaviour during dinner. There was something about Will that caught Jack’s imagination and seemed intent to hold it, though he could not make head nor tail of it.

“You have not turned a page in ten minutes,” Bella noted, bemused, “You only pretend to read if there is something on your mind. Has it anything to do with the recent murders?”

Jack closed his book with a sigh. He did not envy men who married women who preferred not to think. He had always found them dull and colourless. He was pleased with Bella, and loved her deeply. In the face of all that, he still found it inconvenient at times that Bella was as clever as she was. She could always look right through him, as if his flesh served as no barrier.

“I should hope not,” Jack replied with a frown, “I am perplexed by our young Will Graham. His behaviour tonight was strange. Do you not think so?”

Bella smiled, and it was as if she had a secret. Jack knew Bella as well as she knew him, and he was instantly curious as to the reason behind her expression.

“Not at all,” Bella said, “given the circumstances, I think Will is keeping his head quite well.”

Jack furrowed his brow. Bella must have seen something he had not while they had dined with the boy. Jack had not come up with any reasonable explanation for Will’s behaviour, but it was clear to him Bella believed she knew it surely.

“What are the circumstances?” he asked, “surely you do not mean the painting Count Lecter had done of him.”

Bella waved her hand, dismissing his weak guess. She was clearly enjoying this, as if it were a game. The thought reminded Jack of what Bella had said about Will and Lecter, and he wondered if she was attempting to live life as they did, enjoying every moment and finding humour in it.

“All you ever think of is death and darkness. You cannot see the light when it is sitting before you,” she said, “It is clear to me that Will has fallen in love.”

Jack was surprised, and Bella could likely see it clearly on his face. She nodded as if she had expected nothing else of him, still smiling her pleased and amused smile.

“Surely you noticed that Will never offered us a reason behind his good temper tonight, though he admitted it was unusual,” Bella continued, “He spoke of nearly everything else,

even those ghastly murders."

Jack nodded.

"And he excused himself early, saying he was tired when I could not see a sign of wear on him," he added thoughtfully, "do you suppose he meant to meet with his lover, then?"

Bella's smile answered the question before her lips parted to do so. She looked beautiful in the low evening light, and Jack was once again pleased with himself for having convinced her to marry him.

"I suppose he would have not graced us with his company at all tonight if he were not such a polite young man," she said, "he was anxious to leave from the moment he arrived, though he was polite enough not to say as much."

Jack considered it for a long moment, watching the flickering shadows along the shelves of books. He had thought Will much too sober to ever take to a flight of fancy in such a way, though he did think love a very healthy thing for anyone to experience at least once in life. He decided he should not be so surprised, especially since Will seemed to surround himself with only company who could provide intelligent conversation. He had been bound to find some clever young woman sooner or later, and now he had. That was a very good thing for him.

"I wish he would have told us," Jack decided, "We could have congratulated him. I would like to meet whoever managed to capture his heart in such a way. He was nearly unrecognisable at dinner tonight. She must be quite a specimen to have changed him so."

Bella nodded, standing to select another book for herself. She walked to the shelf with a grace and elegance Jack often admired, her movements smooth and purposeful with little flourish. She was beautiful, but also practical in all things.

"Perhaps she is destitute, or he has some other reason to be ashamed of her," she said, "I am sure in any case that we will meet her eventually."

Jack hummed thoughtfully, though his frown reappeared.

"I cannot imagine him being ashamed of anyone," he said, "he is so frank with his thoughts on all things. He even told me he would not ever marry Alana Bloom, because she was far too social and he would feel he had to compete with any man they had for company. Is that not peculiar?"

Bella lifted a shoulder in a shrug, opening her new novel to skim the first page. Jack studied her delicate neck, how thin and fragile she seemed despite the fire within her making her his match in every way. There had been other men before him, vying for her attention with all their might. Jack was unaccountably fortunate to have been the one to whom she had returned the spark.

"He is a peculiar boy, with peculiar tastes. I do not think Miss Bloom has any more interest in him than he does in her, so it is good he does not wish to marry her. You are right, though,

that whoever has caught his eye must be quite extraordinary."

Jack felt as if that was somewhat an understatement, but he agreed with his wife on the basis of it. Will was strange. It was to be expected that any person Will had found his heart captured by would be similarly so.

"I am satisfied we have solved the case of his peculiar behaviour," Jack said, "Let us get to bed. I have much work to do tomorrow."

Bella set her book down on the desk and came to Jack, smiling beautifully as he stood to join her. He really did love her deeply, and he hoped Will would find his happiness with whoever he had become attached to.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Hannibal gets to enjoy a morning with Will.

4

Chapter Summary

Hannibal is living the dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal carefully sketched in the vibrant quietude of the morning, intent on leaving Will asleep for as long as possible. The bright morning light shone in and cast Will in magnificent relief, his lithe body pale and glorious in his relaxed state. Will's ebony curls were mussed with sleep, a dark halo around his angelic face. Hannibal could see the slight movement of Will's eyes under the delicate lids, making his dark lashes flutter against his cheeks. The slow and gentle rhythm of his breathing harmonised with the distant sounds of birds and insects waking in the garden.

Hannibal had a mind to spend every morning exactly like this, waking up with his senses filled by Will, his warmth, scent, and softness, the sound of his breathing and his steady heartbeat within his chest. To watch the sun slowly filter in, like the first notes of a symphony, and play upon his skin as Hannibal's hands and lips had done only the night before. A soft caress that only Will's features should be afforded by man, nature, or even God, should there be such a being who did not dwell within that very body Hannibal was currently drawing. For any other creature or thing in the entire world to be looked upon with reverence or love anywhere near what Hannibal would give to Will was blasphemy, and he felt it an affront to the powers of reality.

Will stirred slightly as a ray of sun caught over his eyes, and Hannibal went to him, setting aside the finished sketch of the delectable boy. Will huffed a harsh breath and opened his eyes, fixing his brilliant gaze on Hannibal.

That was another thing Hannibal would like to have every morning.

"Did you sleep well, dear Will?" Hannibal asked, sliding one hand into Will's delicious curls.

The boy huffed again, this time an intentional partial laugh. Though it was meant to mock Hannibal, he did not feel any less pleased for it. Will was a cruel God, but Hannibal thought he was the kind that would care for his devotees despite the cruelty. These were only tests to try Hannibal's devotion to his God. He was determined to show his loyalty and love for his deity, no matter the cost, entirely convinced now that he would find the reward far greater than he could conceive.

"I see *you* did not, Count Lecter," Will said, "I had thought to wake with you still beside me, but it seems you were of a mind to work instead. I wonder if you ever think of anything but

your art."

Hannibal smiled and pressed a kiss softly to Will's lips. Even in the early moments of waking, Will's wit was as quick and sharp as ever. His words cutting and direct, aimed to flay the facades of the world away and reveal the truth, no matter how unseemly or horrific.

"I would that one of my creations could decay in your stead, so I may preserve your mind and beauty just as you are today," Hannibal said, "My compulsion is to preserve the part of you that I can, and enjoy the rest while I am able. Surely you would not begrudge me that."

Will shook his head in his bemusement and turned to look out the window. The light caught there, flaring in the blue and illuminating Will's eyes like a turbulent sea. Hannibal would have painted him just as he looked now, but for fear that anyone other than himself would lay their eyes on it. He vowed in his heart that Will's pure beauty, in a state such as this, would be for his eyes only, and he would hoard it and glut on it whenever possible.

"Then Bella Crawford was mistaken entirely. She is of the opinion you live completely in the moment, finding enjoyment and amusement in whatever way you find most apt at the time. She does not consider you so sentimental."

Hannibal couldn't help but grin at the boy in his bed. He had been pleased to hear from Will that he had discussed Hannibal with Jack and Bella the night before. He had been right to think he would occupy Will's thoughts for the evening, and it pleased him that Jack had known it. Jack would have little to no idea why Hannibal had been on Will's mind so securely, but just the idea that he was given all the clues to put it together was a thrill to Hannibal. To dwell on the fringe of so many aspects of Jack's life, while not being any large face to him, was like a well planned dance. Hannibal was very fond of dancing, and he found this a particularly exciting challenge. He was anxious to find more ways to infiltrate the life of the investigator before his presence was truly acknowledged.

"I am not sentimental for any reason other than you," he vowed, "It saddens me to think your brilliant mind would fade with age."

Will huffed, likely miffed by such a sentiment with the memory of everything he had staunchly defended to Chilton the day before, and levered himself up on his arms, letting the sheets fall further to pool around his hips and exposing his pale belly to the morning light. Hannibal curbed the impulse to lean forward and nip his teeth into that vulnerable flesh, turning it pink with his soft bites. As pleasant as that may be, paired with the soft and beautiful sounds it would be sure to elicit from Will's lips, there were other matters to attend to.

"Do you have any occupations for the day?" he asked, drawing Will to cast his shining eyes on him again.

Will smiled conspiratorially, running a hand through his dark curls and sending them even more askew in a delicious way. He had a faint shadow of facial hair from the day before, reminiscent of the beard he usually kept. While it was not in fashion, Hannibal thought Will's beard entirely befitting of him and helped him to appear older and wiser. It accentuated the dynamics of his face. Hannibal could hardly wait for it to return.

“Why do you ask, Count Lecter?” Will returned with feigned naivete, “Do you intend to keep me here so you may cover more pages with my face?”

Hannibal took Will’s hand and pressed a kiss to the palm, then nipped lightly at the skin of his wrist. Will tasted divine, as Hannibal had known he would. Every inch of his skin was gifted with the flavour of Will, something intangible and indescribable and all his own. Hannibal would eat the boy up if it would not leave him without that beautiful mind forever more.

“I thought to take you to the opera,” he said, “Faust is on, and I would be remiss to be bereft of your company for even a moment today. I would very much like to take you.”

Will laughed a light laugh and put a hand to Hannibal’s shoulder, turning to push and manoeuvre Hannibal’s body so he was laying on the bed with Will over him. Hannibal allowed himself to be moved, delighted by Will’s strength and determination. Will looked glorious. As glorious as the sun shining out from behind a cloud, sending beams to earth to light only the chosen spots and grant them with warmth. Hannibal was blessed to be the chosen one in this moment, to feel the warmth of Will’s unfathomable light on his skin and in his mind.

“I am to lunch with Alana Bloom this afternoon,” Will said, “I would not go without returning home and dressing properly, either. You will have to do without me for quite some hours today, it seems. But you will manage.”

Hannibal frowned, holding tightly to Will’s waist. The sensation of Will’s bare skin under his hands set anew the flame in Hannibal’s belly, and he would have kept Will in that bed all day were it not for the impeccable timing of a knock on the door.

“Count Lecter, do not forget your engagements for the day,” Francis said courteously, remaining without the door, “you are to meet with Lord Verger today for tea, and you have yet to eat anything or even dress.”

Hannibal sighed softly. Will dropped himself down onto Hannibal’s chest, his hair falling across Hannibal’s jaw and tickling his nose and lips. Hannibal could not help but breathe in deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of his dear boy.

“Thank you, Francis,” Hannibal called, wishing the earth would cease its rotation so that he might suspend this moment with Will for eternity, “I will be up and about in but a moment.”

Francis left, and Will laughed softly into Hannibal’s chest, the vibrations of the sound seeming to resonate in his very ribs. The minx lifted his head and met Hannibal’s eyes through his wild hair, shining with mirth and pleasure. Oh, how Hannibal would have drawn him here, too. Preserve every moment, every expression Will made. But he would also have preserved the sound of his laughter, the feel of his skin, and the smell of his hair. Those were things he was not able to capture, no matter how skilled his hands with a brush. These were the things he mourned the loss of when Will was gone from him, and feared the loss of when Will would die. He was certain he would perish long before Will, one way or the other, but he felt it would be a great loss to the world as a whole when Will Graham would be taken from it.

“I think Francis knows very well why you have not eaten or dressed, Count Lecter,” Will said, his tone teasing Hannibal and making him wish all the more that they could be alone in the world, “Perhaps I should ask him to ready a cab for me so I may return home unobserved by others. What a scandal this would be to you, sir.”

Hannibal shook his head and pulled Will up, catching one of his delicate ears between his teeth. Will let out the smallest yip of surprise at the bite, though Hannibal did not bite hard enough to cause true pain. Nor would it leave a mark. Though it would likely be concealed by Will’s lovely curls of hair, it would not do to risk the discovery. Especially because Hannibal thought Alana Bloom to be quite perceptive, and more likely than most to notice something so small.

“I would welcome the scandal, to let the world know what a creature I have managed to bed this night,” Hannibal said, feeling the truth of it in his bones, “your beauty would be coveted by all, and they would know you were unattainable. To have and keep you, I would pay any price.”

Will hummed, biting Hannibal’s ear gently in retaliation for the surprise of the teeth a moment before. Hannibal’s arms wrapped around the boy, desperate to keep him even a moment longer. Their inevitable separation sat like dread on his mind and chest, and he would deny it power over him if he could.

“I’ll ask for a cab all the same,” Will said, “I can pretend sudden illness if I am asked as to my whereabouts this night. I was simply too ill to return home, and you offered to let me rest in one of the spare rooms. I am much recovered, thanks to your attentive treatment.”

Hannibal breathed Will in again, and the boy pulled away. Hannibal allowed him to go, though his heart ached at the thought of parting. He would be unable to focus on anything but the passing of the hours while they were apart, calculating the time until he would be able to see Will again.

Hannibal trusted Francis implicitly, even with this secret. The man was loyal and serious, and Hannibal was certain he had not been unaware of Hannibal’s intentions with Will for the most part of their dalliance. He had never once cast so much as a disapproving glance at either of them, and instead seemed entirely fond of Will in a friendly manner. That being as it was, Hannibal still would have kept Will entirely to himself, not even allowing Francis to help him this morning to find a discrete means of travel, were it an option.

“Why, Count Lecter, you surely are the jealous type,” Will said chidingly, “I can see in your face that you would begrudge Francis the chance to see and speak with me this morning. Shame on you for such thoughts. I would punish you now for it, but I do not have the time. I should hope you will reconsider your jealousy while I am away, and find it in your heart to allow me a life apart from you. Now, Count Lecter, will you kiss me before I leave?”

Hannibal got up out of the bed with such speed he surprised himself, catching Will by the waist which was now obscured by the clothes he had worn the day before. He buried his nose in the wild curls he was so enamoured with, breathing in deeply and pressing fervent kisses to the crown of Will’s magnificent head.

Will laughed, the sound no more cruel than the appearance of the boy it came from, yet it was still mocking of Hannibal's actions. Will tipped his head up and caught Hannibal in a kiss, his hands running over Hannibal's chest with the same hunger Hannibal felt. If Will were not so intent on making Hannibal suffer for his perceived imperfections, Hannibal thought they really would spend all day in this room, in the bed. It was clear Will was as desirous of that outcome as Hannibal himself.

But Will did have some kind of cruelty in him. The kind that was playful as much as it was sadistic. He wanted to see Hannibal be unhappy, perhaps solely so he could be the cause for his better spirits. He would leave, only so that Hannibal would be displeased, and then return so that Hannibal would again be elated. If that was not cruel in some way, Hannibal was unable to describe what it was.

"I would kiss every inch of your skin before you leave, if only these wretched clothes were not in my way," Hannibal said, and he felt the words honestly in his chest.

Will smiled brightly and shook his head, his glistening curls bouncing as his eyes shone with amusement. Hannibal wanted to bite all along his pale neck, and mark his jaw for the marks to be covered by the incoming beard. Hannibal wanted to carve his name into Will's flesh so that everyone would know that he had been claimed and would not be touched by anyone other than Hannibal.

"You must leave something for tonight," Will chided, "or else I shall make you wait much longer. Though perhaps we should not meet tonight, lest we truly become a topic of gossip."

Hannibal's grip tightened at the idea, though he knew it was an idle threat, meant only to elicit a reaction from him as it had. His suspicions were confirmed when Will grinned wider and pressed a light kiss to Hannibal's lips. He was delicious, this young man Hannibal had fixated on. Every part of Will was a fulfilment of the senses, and Hannibal wanted to drown in him.

"Shall I come to you, or will you return to me?" Hannibal asked.

Will hummed thoughtfully, extracting himself from Hannibal's arms and stepping to the mirror where he looked to put his hair back into some semblance of order. Even in this, Will did not appear vain in the least. He did not fix his hair so that he would be more attractive to others. It was simply so he would not be the object of ridicule should he be seen before he had the chance to dress properly for his engagement for lunch.

"I should be at home tonight," Will said, "it would not do for me to be seen here twice in as many nights. Anything we can to limit the words exchanged behind our backs, I think. Is that amenable to you, Count Lecter?"

It most certainly was not amenable. Hannibal believed the only amenable option would be to return to bed that very instant, and damn all the engagements either of them had for the future that did not include the other. He wanted very badly to ruin Will's hair again, and he considered that he should have secreted away Will's clothes while he slept so he would not have been able to dress.

Perhaps Will would have asked to borrow an item or two of Hannibal's clothes. The thought was deliciously scandalous, and Hannibal mourned the lost opportunity as Will turned to face him with an eyebrow raised in inquiry.

"I shall have to be satisfied with it, at least," Hannibal said sullenly, "As it appears you have no intention of being swayed, stubborn boy. But I will not be happy again until I have you."

Will turned and pressed a terribly brief kiss to Hannibal's lips before he was out the door to find Francis. Hannibal was left, already aching with Will's absence, to prepare for the day on his own.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Will Alana notice that something is going on?

5

Chapter Summary

Alana learns something new about her friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was something quite unusual about Will's demeanour today. Alana had not seen him in quite some time, but she was surprised by the change. Will was always pleasant to be around, and she felt entirely safe in his presence, unlike many other men, because he had not once made an attempt to capture her affections. She thought he likely saw her as too friendly, and he would not be able to keep up with her social life if they were ever to court or marry.

That Will had claimed to be busy the last time Alana had extended an invitation had been quite a surprise because of this. She had believed herself nearly his only friend, perhaps aside from Bella Crawford. Jack was far too professional in his interest in Will for their meetings to be considered friendly, though Alana thought Will had some level of fondness for the investigator. For Will to have any prior engagements was a rare thing, and Alana was anxious for him to tell her about it.

Will was unusually talkative, chatting pleasantly over their lunch, about the weather and the news and all the regular topics. That was also strange, as Will usually avoided topics he considered banal. He would more often prefer silence to droning chatter.

So Alana gathered he was avoiding a topic. Most likely the one she was most curious about.

"I think all investigators should be made to study the human mind, or else employ one who has," Will was saying, one of the points he made clear to Jack Crawford often, "to catch someone as intelligent as this Ripper, they must understand how they think."

"Why are you so pleased today, Will?" Alana asked, knowing others would have seen her change of topic as jarring and even rude. But Will would not.

Will's face flushed slightly, just enough that Alana noticed the light dusting of pink over his cheekbones, above the shadow of beard that had begun to grow back. Will so rarely shaved his face clean, so it was yet another reason Alana had to be curious what he had been up to recently. It was clear then that Will had been avoiding it as Alana had suspected, going off of the blush and how he hesitated now to answer her question. It made her more curious, because Will rarely concealed things from her, as she was his friend.

"In order to tell you, I must begin with what happened some time ago. In a way, I have you to thank for all of it, for I meant to speak with you when I happened upon him."

Alana was altogether bewildered, seeing the way Will was smiling as he spoke. Often, when Will smiled, he looked as if it was a great physical and mental effort to do so. Now, Will seemed largely unaware that he was smiling. His eyes were bright, the way they were when Will found a new book he was enamoured with, one that engaged his mind in a new and exciting way.

Will related the tale of his collision with Count Lecter, just as he had for the Crawfords the night before. Alana was surprised that neither Hannibal nor Will had told her of their meeting before now. It seemed they had both been changed by it, if Will's tale was true, and Alana would have expected to have heard it already. It was not anything to be ashamed of, nor could she imagine any other reason why they would feel the need to keep it a secret from her. She was not prone to spreading gossip, so it was not as if they feared rumours spreading about them if she were to be told.

"Hannibal has been painting my portrait," Will said, "That is what I had promised to do the day you called for me. I was to sit for him. We have the most engaging discussions, Alana, and I have never been so content to sit still for hours as when he paints and we talk. But it is finished now, and you must see it. Either you must ask him to see it, or once it is at my home you must visit me to do so. Hannibal says it is the best work he has ever done, and I cannot help but believe him when I look at it. I have never felt so handsome as when I see how he has depicted me."

Alana was delighted, but still just as bewildered as ever. She had seen and talked to Hannibal during the period Will was talking of, but he had not mentioned any work he was doing. For something as great as what Will described, he should have been pleased to tell her about it. She supposed it might have been some artistic superstition on Hannibal's part, afraid speaking of his work while it was going well would cause it to turn and he might not be pleased with the finished piece. Though Hannibal had never shown any superstitious inclinations before, she thought it still a possibility.

"I certainly will," Alana said, "and shame on you both for keeping this all a secret. I should have liked to invite you both for dinner had I known you had gotten on so fine."

Will laughed lightly.

"I suspect Hannibal has wanted to keep me to himself," he said, "he tells me he finds conversation with anyone but me to be dull. I'm certain he does not include you in that, however. He does tend to hyperbolize when he feels it will help him make his case."

Be that as it may, Alana still found it surprising that Hannibal would have said such a thing. He gave the impression of utmost courtesy and politeness when one was speaking with him, even long after one came to know him. It seemed uncharacteristic for him to say anything impolite about anyone, regardless of whether or not they were present. Moreso, it would be out of character for Will to have made such a thing up simply to boast, leading Alana to believe Hannibal truly had said it, though perhaps in jest.

"Perhaps you can convince him to invite us both to dinner, where he can show me this great work of his," Alana suggested, "and I can judge for myself if he is truly so enamoured with you, as I find it quite amazing to think of."

Will grinned.

“I’m certain he would be more than willing. If I am not careful, I expect he will try to invite half of London so he can display the painting before it goes to my home forever. He enjoys showing off nearly more than anything else, you know. He behaves very humbly, but every action is meant to display his skill and knowledge.”

Alana laughed.

“Your cynicism extends even to him,” she wondered aloud, “is there any topic or subject you do not find fault in?”

Will had the decency to appear chastened by her words, but he still smiled.

“As far as I can tell, the only fault of our Ripper is that he kills,” Will answered, “every action of his is executed with such precision and confidence, without a singular mistake. I rather think if I knew him I would declare him infallible.”

Alana shook her head, unsure if Will was being sincere. His sense of humour was so entirely dry it was often hard to know when he meant something as a joke. Additionally, he did have a quick wit and a powerful mind, so his philosophies left many people questioning their own beliefs after a conversation where he had used them to capacity. It was very similar to the manner in which Hannibal would speak when he wished to amuse himself. In that way, Alana was not at all surprised that they had connected so closely. It was almost as if they had been crafted out of the same clay.

Still, this change of topic struck her as strange, and she was unnerved that Will so often turned back to the murders that held the entire city in terror. The way Will spoke of the Ripper so often ranged from critical to admiring and every other opinion one could have in regards to someone who had so little regard for human life.

“You are wicked, Will,” Alana said, “How would Jack Crawford react if he were to hear you just now? It is his new purpose in life to catch the Ripper, and I doubt God himself would be able to stop him.”

Will laughed, breaking his solemn expression and revealing it had indeed been a joke. That put Alana at ease once more, and she smiled. Will always managed to send her on such journeys during their discussions, swinging between anxious and afraid, and perfectly comfortable and safe. Will made her feel safe, but his words made her aware of her own vulnerability.

“Jack Crawford would be taking notes if he could hear me,” Will said, “despite my assertions that he should make a study of the human mind, he still has yet to begin to understand the mind of our Ripper. He asks me often to tell him what I see, but I fear he does not understand a single word of it. If the Ripper is to be caught, I believe it will be because the Ripper wishes it.”

Alana would have called that ridiculous, but she was all too aware that Will was typically right about these things. He was not only educating himself on the matters of the human

mind, but he had a natural inclination toward it. He often knew things about others that he had no reason to know, and it put many people ill at ease when in his company. That was one of the reasons Alana had thought herself one of his few friends.

Alana was educating herself on the human mind as well, but she had no hope of ever catching up to Will on the matter. She doubted there were many people in the world who had the aptitude for it. She thought Hannibal might be one, which caused Alana to think their conversations must truly be quite something to witness. Conversation with either one already tended to be complex and fast paced, so she could hardly imagine how well they must play off each other.

“Does Jack Crawford share your view on the killer?” Alana asked, curious because she had been impressed that it was not so when she had spoken with Jack. He seemed solidly to believe it was only a matter of time before the killer would make a mistake, and would consequently be revealed. If he shared such a hopeless opinion as Will had posed, Alana thought she would have noticed.

Will shook his head. His eyes had held that peculiar sparkle of delight throughout their conversation, and now it was bright as it always became when he spoke of the Ripper. Alana would have been deeply concerned by his affinity for the subject, did she not know him so well. Will was a kind and caring person, genuinely compelled to do what was right. It was that strong morality that Alana believed led him to get on with Jack Crawford.

“I have shared my thoughts with Jack, but he has faith in a just world,” Will said, “he believes good will always triumph over evil, and that he stands at the head of what is right in this city. His pride and faith in himself may someday prove to be his destruction.”

Will’s cynicism was always a jarring contrast to his good nature, as he sounded to be so cruel and unhappy, but he was pleasant. Alana was always impressed that he managed to contain such contradictions within himself and find such a near perfect balance. Most people Alana met listed heavily to one side. She, herself, was far more optimistic than was realistic, and she thought Jack more pessimistic.

“You know I adore you, Will,” Alana said, “But I hope that you are wrong and Jack is right. I would like to walk the streets without fear again.”

Will nodded.

“I do not hold that against you at all,” he said genially, “I think it is only human nature to want to believe the best. However, I do wonder if you think there is only one murderer in all of London. We were not without danger before our Ripper made his debut, but something about his work inspires terror.”

Alana frowned, curious that Will wasn’t afraid of the killer. London had been gripped by fear of the butcher since it had become clear they had no intention to slow down or stop the slaughter. Everyone was petrified of walking alone.

Now that Alana took a moment to consider it, Will never had been. Will continued as if nothing had changed. He did not seem to be concerned by the danger in the least.

In Alana's mind, the bold display of the Rippers' kills was what inspired such terror in everyone. It was one thing to fear being killed, and another entirely to fear having your body desecrated and used in such a grotesque way. It was the fear of humiliation after death, along with the pain leading up to death.

Alana wondered that Will feared neither death nor desecration. She supposed it very well could be an act, an air he put on when in company in order to appear brave. While it was possible, Alana considered it unlikely, as in her experience Will did not care much for the perception of others, nor did he work to impress anyone through false face. If Will changed his manner, it was most often to play upon the personalities of his company, such as behaving so soberly with Jack Crawford that the other man considered Will a serious savant. Alana saw subtle shifts in his behaviour, but had never heard him change his opinion to suit his company. He was stolid in his beliefs, and his words reflected that.

The only true way for Alana to learn Will's feelings on the fear of the Ripper would be to ask him frankly.

"Do you not fear the Ripper?" she asked, feeling no reason not to. Will was her friend, and she trusted him implicitly. "Do you not fear having your body mutilated in such a horrific way?"

The very thought of such a thing sent a shiver down her spine, and Alana did not like the way the words felt in her mouth. She would be pleased to never say such a thing ever again.

Will laughed.

"Horrific?" he asked, as if the idea was absurd. It caused Alana further distress, because he clearly did not feel disgusted or horrified by it the way he should. "That is laughable, Doctor Bloom. What the Ripper does should not be described as horrific. He is an artist with the most expensive medium available. To create an artwork costs a very life. His skill and dedication should be marvelled at, rather than scoffed.

Alana could not even recall how they had come back to the topic of Jack the Ripper. She remembered asking Will to talk of Hannibal, but they had somehow come round to the murders again, and Will was saying some very upsetting things. She never would have expected him to sound so deeply admiring of the killer, and it set her nerves entirely on edge.

"No," Will continued, apparently unaware of Alana's reaction to his words, "If I were to be killed, I should hope it would be at the hands of the Ripper. The tragedy is not to die, but to be wasted. Illness or accident make no use of death, but the Ripper uses death as a creative medium, and I can think of no higher honour than to be chosen as the material for his work. I would only mourn the fact that I would be unable to cast my eyes upon the finished product, being dead as I must by necessity be."

Alana was suddenly turned off her food, setting her silverware aside. The way Will spoke of the killings, his eyes bright and excited, turned her stomach and left her feeling nearly ill.

"Forgive me for asking," She said, "I would like to speak of something else now, if that is to your taste."

Will blinked, as if his mind had been far off and only now did he realise he had been speaking at all. It was as if he had altogether forgotten Alana was there. He at once ducked his head in a show of meek shame, and Alana realised he had quite forgotten to whom he was speaking. He felt regret for having allowed his tongue to run away with him in a way that had caused Alana distress. That led Alana to relax more, as he had been unaware of himself and likely did not even feel the things he had expressed. He had told her once he sometimes thought so deeply about another person it was as if he became them, his thoughts and feelings changing to those of his subject. Alana was sure she had never seen it happen before, but that must have been the explanation for what she had just witnessed. That gave her some relief, as if meant Will's own beliefs were likely not what he had said today, and he had merely been lost in the mind of the killer for a moment.

"My apologies, Alana," Will said, "I think I was quite lost for a moment. I hope I did not frighten you."

Alana smiled, though there was a lingering unease in her chest.

"I worry for you, Will," she said honestly, "Your study of the human mind seems to be only directed toward those with deviant ideologies, and I worry one day you will be lost and never find your way back."

Will smiled, though he had not yet regained the ease and confidence with which he had spoken of the murders. It seemed he would be quite careful now not to allow his mind to wander, if only to spare Alana the fright.

"You need not worry for me, Doctor Bloom," he said kindly, "I have an excellent sense of direction. I have not once been lost that I could not regain my bearings, and I take some sense of pride in the fact. None know the lay of my own mind better than myself, I should think, so it is only a matter of knowing when I have wandered too far. I do apologise again for your clear unease."

Alana nodded at his words, grateful he seemed to once again be in his right mind. She was not quite done with the matter, though, so she pressed on with her concern.

"Do you not think it would be wise to make a study of the more acceptable minds around you?" she asked, "surely it cannot be good for your health to saturate your thoughts in such dark matters."

Will huffed a polite laugh and shook his head.

"Good or not for my health, I find no interest in the banal thought of the ordinary man. Set me to the task, and I can tell you every act a man will do in nearly any situation. Predictable is the common man, so why would I waste my time filling my thoughts with them?"

Alana was unsure how she was meant to respond to such a philosophy. She felt as if she was learning something new and not wholly pleasant about Will today, and she did not know if she was meant to agree with him or if it would be better to tell him how he was confusing and frightening her with his passionate defence of his dark interests.

“So long as you do not confuse your own thoughts and desires with those of the unpleasant people you choose to study, I suppose I cannot object to what you choose to do,” She said at length, certain she was saying exactly the wrong thing only by nature of the fact she had chosen it so carefully. It was what always seemed to happen in situations like this.

But Will did not react as if she had offended him. He smiled and nodded, and went on to change the subject to a more pleasant conversational topic.

“Have you spoken with Margot Verger recently?”

Alana could not help the blush that came to her face at the question. As it so happened, Margot was set to have tea with Alana that evening, while her brother was otherwise disposed. Alana did not know who Mason would be spending tea time with, but she was more than pleased to have the opportunity to see Margot.

Chapter End Notes

Mason Verger is not a very nice guest for tea

6

Chapter Summary

Hannibal begins to regret leaving the painting out where anyone can see it

Mason Verger had never “made a study of the human mind” as Will would have put it. That being said, it didn’t take a genius to see that Count Lecter was in a strange humour today. He was pleased and just as amiable as ever, but there was a certain element of anxiety as well, almost as if he had done something wicked and expected to be found out.

Lecter had also been trying to get Mason to leave his home for quite some time now, the evening going on past usual tea time. It was one of the ways Mason enjoyed himself, watching a polite host struggle with the desire for him to leave. Until today, Count Lecter had been the one host who seemed to have endless stores of patience, and Mason did not flatter himself into thinking he had worn down the man’s store of it. He was curious to discover the outside factor responsible for the change.

He hadn’t expected to find it in the man’s art.

“Who might this be, Count Lecter?” Mason wondered, peering at the large portrait.

Mason didn’t care much for art, but even he could see that this painting was quite impressive. The subject was lovely and youthful, though a bit old for Mason’s taste. The quality of work was high, and Mason assumed Lecter would be quite proud of it.

That was why it was such a shock that Lecter made an expression of clear distaste when Mason asked about the picture.

“A young man I became acquainted with through Alana Bloom,” Lecter said, cutting his reply short despite his usual eagerness to speak about his work, “This painting will be going to him the moment it has been prepared.”

Mason raised an eyebrow, feeling he may have hit upon something interesting. He could see Lecter was slightly distracted now, and the rarity of that made all this more curious.

“Will you tell me his name, or must I ask Alana Bloom who the young muse is?” Mason asked, “I am curious to meet him. He has a face like he wants to see everything, those wide eyes. He’s either innocent, or entirely wicked. I think I would like to find out which.”

Lecter’s expression flickered with distaste again, and Mason decided there was some deep attachment to this mysterious young man. Lecter did not want Mason to meet him, and that only made him want to all the more.

“He is of little significance,” Lecter said, quite a bold-faced lie for someone as well respected as the Count, “don’t pay him any more mind. The fact that you are not already aware of him means he has no bearing on your social circles.”

Mason was growing even more curious every moment Lecter put off speaking the boy’s name. He must be something quite special for Count Lecter to want to keep him a secret, and Mason did enjoy discovering secrets. The dirtier the better, especially in the case of someone like Lecter, who Mason had never been able to ruffle the way he had wanted. Lecter was untouchable, or so he wanted others to think. This was the first show of potential weakness Mason had ever caught whiff of, and he determined to make good on it.

“Are you in the sitting room, Hannibal?”

The voice carried down the hall to the room they were in, and Mason caught another flicker of unease in Lecter’s face. It was a young voice Mason did not know, and from that reaction he thought it more than likely he was the subject of the painting.

“I know I said I would not return today, but you have been taking so long and I am anxious to tell you of my lunch with Alana. I quite lost myself and spoke of-”

The young man entered the room and froze when he saw Mason. Unbeknownst to Mason, this was the second time in as many days that Will found himself walking into this room to find someone he had not been expecting, leaving him at a loss for words in a stunning display of helplessness.

“Mason, I would appreciate it if you would leave now,” Lecter said, dropping all pretence of hospitality, “I have other engagements this evening, and you are causing conflict.”

The young man was standing stock still, as if awaiting a cue as to how to behave in this situation, staring with those wide eyes at Mason as if he was entirely alien to the situation. While he was clearly the subject of the painting, Mason thought there was something less about him. Lecter had not been entirely loyal to the original, though it was difficult to be sure what was lacking in the real face when compared to the painted one. Mason thought he might have been able to identify it if he were more educated in the arts.

“Hello,” Mason said, ignoring Lecter altogether in order to step closer to the curious young man who the Count would keep hidden from him, “I am Mason Verger. I do not believe we have had the pleasure of being introduced.”

Despite the clear conflict on his face, the boy accepted the offered handshake, apparently giving into the ingrained courtesy that would normally be expected of him. That made Mason smile even wider, and he found that the young man’s hands were surprisingly rough for a gentleman. The boy laboured in some sense, though his dress was of the same class as Mason’s and Lecter’s. Everything Mason noticed made the boy more of a puzzle to him.

The young man’s polite education overpowered his hesitance again, and he offered his own name.

“I am Will Graham,” he said warily, casting a glance at Lecter as if for guidance, “We have not, though your reputation precedes you, as I am sure you are aware. Count Lecter seems to believe you have overstayed your welcome, and I rather think it would be best not to further upset him, do you not agree?”

Mason laughed, delighted by the grit the young man showed by taking Lecter’s side against him. If his reputation truly preceded him, Mason would have expected Will to show more deference to him. That could be easily remedied, though Mason wanted to learn a bit more about the boy before he took any action.

“I do not,” Mason said, “I think I would much rather learn more about you, who the Count has been trying ever so hard to conceal from me. He would not tell me your name, and has tried so hard to keep us from becoming acquainted.”

Mason released Will’s hand and turned back to Lecter, who had erased all expression from his face during their short interaction. Mason was delighted to see that he was so affected by the subversion of his desires.

“I can see why you would have wanted to keep me from seeing him. Your painting is not as accurate as I would have expected of you. There is an air of mystery to the face in the picture, while this young man is quite an open book to anyone who cares to look at him. Anyone who meets Will after seeing the picture is certain to be disappointed by what they are presented with.”

Another flash of something in Lecter’s eyes, perhaps anger this time. Mason was delighted. Doctor Lecter had seemed far too good for far too long. It would be a unique pleasure to discover he was secretly wicked.

“You claim you want to become acquainted with me, yet you ignore me entirely,” Will said, making Mason turn back to face him again, “Your reputation does not do justice to the truth of your character, I see. Despite having every opportunity and resource easily at your disposal, the highest education money can afford offered to you at every turn, you squander your good fortune and choose instead to be cruel. You feel no obligation to forge a legacy, or to improve upon the one handed down to you. Instead of doing anything of import, you delight in suffering and fill yourself with harmful rumours and gossip. You know you can do nothing that will bring shame on your family name, so you wish to see what you can inflict upon the world before someone finally determines to take you to task. You will always be alone because you are such a vile creature no one can bear to be around you. If I did not feel such disgust for you, I might have it in my mind to feel sorry for you.”

Mason was speechless for what he thought was the first time in his life, left just staring at Will Graham in amazement. He must have been talking to Mason’s darling Margot, as well as others who didn’t like him very much. The only thing that really bewildered Mason was why he would have been asking around about him. Why had this young man, who had no real social standing, and no apparent benefit from it, been trying to dig up dirt on someone as powerful as Mason Verger? And why had he just given away the entire game by revealing himself? For someone who had to be intelligent in order to have learned all that, this had been a foolish move.

Will was watching Mason realise all of this, his chin tipped up defiantly as if he expected retaliation.

Mason grinned.

“I think I’ll take my leave, gentlemen,” he announced, “Mister Graham, I think I misjudged you. You’re a far more interesting boy than I thought. We’ll see each other again. Goodbye.”

Mason left, laughing at Francis Dollarhyde as he scrambled to get his coat and hat.

He had a new game to play, and he thought Will Graham would make a wonderful toy. If he was right, Will was the key to really getting under Lecter’s skin, and he was delighted by the idea. To get under Count Lecter’s skin would be quite an accomplishment, as he really did seem above it all.

He would have to be careful with the young man, however, as he was deceptively intelligent and already knew more about Mason than he had any right to. It would not do to underestimate him, or Mason would find himself at a disadvantage. Will might have a brain under all that hair, but Mason had money and influence. It would be fascinating to learn which one held more sway on the outcome of the game.

There would, of course, have to be some consequences for Margot if it did turn out she had been talking about him to the young Will Graham. It was not nice, and could be seen as her attempting to stir up trouble for Mason, as the head of the family.

That would come soon enough, and Mason looked forward to it. Margot had always been his favourite plaything, and if she wanted to be a part of this game he would be more than happy to allow it.

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“I fear you have caught the eye of a dangerous man,” Hannibal said, sighing softly and turning to study the painting again. As little as he liked to admit it, even to no one but himself, Mason had been right. There was something about the painting that could not be seen in Will, even by Hannibal who had made a study of his every facet. Something perhaps dark or malicious. Perhaps it was the curl of his lip, or the precise glint in his eyes. Hannibal could not be sure, and the thought tortured him.

Will huffed unhappily, clearly not thrilled to have made the acquaintance of Mason Verger. Though he did not seem daunted either. Hannibal thought it possible Will did not fully comprehend how dangerous it was to be in Mason Verger’s sights. While Will had a unique ability to see the truth of people, he sometimes overestimated his own ability to handle their antics.

“I do not believe Master Verger has done a single day of true work,” Will said, “I feared my own hands would cut through the soft skin of his palms. I only regret that I gave him my name, which you obviously did not want him to have.”

Hannibal huffed, thinking what a mess this could turn out to be. Mason made a habit of being a nuisance, and he had been looking for some way to bother Hannibal for a long while. Hannibal cursed himself for having allowed such a man to see his vulnerability. He had been distracted all day with thoughts of Will, and had not hidden his anticipation as well as he would usually have done. He was almost tempted to hold Will in contempt for being such a distraction, but when he turned to fully face the boy he felt all his resolve to be angry turn into so much dust in the breeze.

"While you are entirely correct about Mason and his character, you would do well to be wary of him in the future," Hannibal chided softly, finding himself unable to be displeased with Will, "he has money and power, and a vindictive temper that is subject to his every whim. He makes a dangerous and volatile enemy."

Will chuffed and tossed his head, exactly in the manner of a horse communicating dissatisfaction or annoyance, and Hannibal found himself smiling at the sight.

"He's a coward who hides behind those subject to him," Will said, "a fool with a crown. But I did not come here against our agreement to discuss someone like him."

Hannibal smiled, and beckoned for Will, who obediently stepped forward and took his hand.

"Of course not, my dear. You came to tell me of your lunch with Alana. Let us be on our way, and you can talk all the while."

Will was flushed with pleasure as Hannibal kissed him, and he looked beautiful. Hannibal marvelled that he had managed to capture him, and was now allowed to touch and kiss as he pleased.

"I am in such an odd temper today, which is entirely your fault if you wondered at all, that I am continually forgetting myself and speaking without forethought. While I was lunching with Alana, I allowed myself to begin speaking of the Ripper case, and spoke so thoughtlessly it is a wonder she did not have me thrown from her home and banished from her life. You have quite spoiled me in always allowing me to speak my mind and never being frightened or horrified. I shall have to bite my tongue more frequently now in order to not offend my acquaintances."

Hannibal was entirely delighted to hear it, finding a deep satisfaction in having affected Will so that he could not control himself when in another's presence. Despite himself, Hannibal found his mind conjuring plans to use this new power in order to see how Will would behave in varying situations. If Will caught any hint of such machinations, he would surely be irate. But until that time, Hannibal would be pleased to experiment with his young lover.

They made their way to Will's home, walking the distance despite the light rain that had begun to fall. Hannibal was entranced by the way droplets of water clung to Will's hair, like stars glittering in the night sky. God had surely created Will to be worshipped for his beauty, his intelligence, and his unerring grace. He was a creature of divinity, and Hannibal did not understand why he seemed the only human aware of it. The only man devoting himself to this deity.

Even if he knew the reason, and he did certainly have some suspicions on the matter, he could not understand how others could overcome the intensity of the boy's allure.

"I think it quite possible we could allow Alana to know of us," Will was saying, "her interest in Margot Verger, while perhaps not quite as intense as what we feel, is of a similar nature, and she could be quite an ally to us."

Hannibal frowned. It was not that he thought Will was wrong, nor did he intend to hide away the nature of their relationship entirely. He would have sent a letter to the paper that very morning and let all of London know if the world were a fair place. But he did have some concerns.

"I fear not," Hannibal said, "If Alana were to share the good news with Miss Verger, I think it not unlikely her brother would be able to get it out of her. I would not want to put either of them in such a position. And I would not want Mason Verger of all people to become aware of such delicate information."

Will's bright mood darkened at once, and while Hannibal was sorry to have soured his temper, he was at the same time delighted to see the cold calculation that shifted like a live thing behind Will's eyes. His young lover was plotting, and Hannibal was more than anxious to know what the boy had in mind.

"Master Verger certainly will make a pest of himself, will he not?" Will mused distantly, far away in his mind and planning, "something will have to be done about him."

Hannibal felt a thrill at his lover's words, and he could not but smile at the boy. He was helplessly in love with Will, and each glimpse of this darkness only drew him further in, making him yearn to sink his teeth into that pale flesh and mark him, draw out the beast and be marked in return.

What improper thoughts for a man such as Count Hannibal Lecter to have. What Mason Verger would do with such things if he only had a method to learn of them.

That thought further amused Hannibal, and they were at Will's home at last.

Peter Bernadone welcomed them in and took their coats.

"You should have-have-have taken a hat with-with-with you, Mister Graham," the man stuttered out, his face flushing slightly at his own wrestling with the words, "The-the-the rain."

Will laughed and put his hand on Peter's shoulder in a comfortably friendly manner.

"I don't mind the rain, Peter," he said, "but I appreciate the concern. I'll keep it in mind next time. Count Lecter will be staying for the evening, so be sure Randall is aware please."

Peter nodded and did his best to give Hannibal a polite smile.

Will had chosen his household staff based on one quality, as far as Hannibal could tell. While they were all fine staff, and entirely competent, what mattered most to Will was their attitude

towards animals.

Will whistled, and the sound of paws rapidly approached as two dogs came into view. Will fell to his knees to greet the dogs, grinning widely and laughing in delight. He was like a boy, the way he enjoyed the company of his dogs and adored them so. Though he had not cared to select his canine companions with the eye of the upper class who would only take purebreds with an impressive pedigree, the stray mutts he had given a home to were quite possibly his most prized possessions.

“Ginger, Gulliver, you be polite to our guest, yes?” Will asked, the dogs fixed on him with impressive focus for canines. Ginger let out a small yip, and Will ruffled her fur.

“Shall we go to the library for now?” Will asked, rising to his feet again.

Hannibal readily agreed, and the four of them continued further into the house. Gulliver kept right at Will’s heels, a well trained hound despite his lack of pedigree. Ginger skipped around excitedly, going from Will to Hannibal and back again.

Compared to Hannibal’s home, Will’s townhouse was modest and inelegant. But Will did not behave as if he were ashamed, and Hannibal certainly wouldn’t say he had any reason to. The fact of the matter was that it was entirely befitting of Will’s character, as he preferred rather more simple and modest things. He was a man of his own making in many ways, and didn’t waste his little wealth on fashion. His uncle lived in the country, in a larger and more opulent house, and Will only went there in order to have some time away from all the bustle of the city, which he often remarked that he abhorred.

Will enjoyed simple things, like fishing and nature. He did not care to make a spectacle of himself. He would never be made a spectacle of if Hannibal were not involved. That was what made their games so delightful. Neither of them would find any enjoyment in such social settings without the other being there.

While Hannibal could find amusement in the company and attention of fools, he did not truly enjoy it if Will was not there to reciprocate the games he played.

It had not always been that way. Before learning that Will Graham existed, Hannibal had thought he enjoyed a great many things he now found had paled in his mind.

“I have been thinking of going to the country house,” Will said casually, as if there was a world in which such a statement would have little bearing on Hannibal and his peace of mind, “I would like to spend an afternoon fishing, and take walks around the grounds. I am certain my father will not mind. He is so rarely there these days, so he may not even know that I am staying there at all.”

Hannibal’s mind was positively whirling at the implications of what Will was saying. It was bold and potentially scandalous, and perfectly delicious. Hannibal would be a fool to let such a chance pass him by.

“What an incredible coincidence,” Hannibal said, attempting to match Will’s casual tone, “I had just been thinking I must escape the smokey air of the city for a time. Would I be

welcome to call on you in the country for a day or two?"

Will smiled, sprawling extravagantly in one of his plush armchairs, Gulliver settling at his feet to rest as a loyal guardian. His posture was so comfortable and familiar it would be considered indecent if anyone else were present. The sight of him was so glorious and appetising Hannibal was physically struggling to keep from ravishing him where he sat. He was only capable of restraining himself because he could anticipate the night ahead of them both.

"If you leave me entirely to my own devices, imagine what mischief I might get up to," Will said, positively wickedly, "You must at least come by for an afternoon, to see that I am not the centre of any great scandal without you."

Hannibal smiled and took his seat beside Will in an identical chair, turning so his whole body was angled toward his young, alluring companion. Ginger, perhaps in an attempt to emulate her more well behaved companion, sat beside Hannibal's chair, though her body wriggled and fidgeted with barely contained energy until she stood back up and began trotting around the room instead.

"Shall I assume you mean to be a part of a scandal regardless, and my only choice is whether or not I will be included in it with you?" he teased, his eyes drawn to the pale stretch of Will's throat as he tipped his head back.

Will huffed softly, the action visible in the movement of his chest. He rolled his head a bit, stretching his neck. While he often did such things just to tease Hannibal, now, Hannibal thought this one was unintentional. He was not aware of his body in this moment.

"If I answer that question honestly now, it will take away all the intrigue and mystery out of the entire potential situation I am attempting to orchestrate," Will said, leaning forward to scratch Gulliver behind the ears, "I suppose you shall have to infer the answer to the best of your ability, and make your decision from that. But beware, else you make the wrong choice and seem quite the fool."

Hannibal thought it more than likely that Will intended to make a fool out of him regardless of his choice. Such was the repayment of the games Hannibal had orchestrated without Will's prior approval, utilising Will's talents as the centrepiece of it all. If Will chose to be kind, they would both enjoy whatever new games he was playing, though Hannibal would be the fool of it all. Hannibal held little h ope of that, knowing that Will had the ability to be extraordinarily cruel, and he only seemed to let himself be so when it was with Hannibal.

Regardless, Hannibal's decision had been made the moment he had seen the spark of mischief in Will's alluring gaze. He would be Will's fool this time, and he would have it no other way.

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